Shen Yuan's No Good, Very Bad Day (You just woke up on the wrong side of the Bed)
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by The_vindico_atrum

Summary

The point was, it clearly started off as a bad day, and he was about to make it, everyone's problem.

(We often see Shen Jiu as an older brother of Shen Yuan, maybe even his twin, but what if Shen Yuan was older.)

(Featuring - Batshit but somehow oblivious Shen Yuan; Shen Jiu being an asshole, like in canon but also, in front of Shen Yuan's canon indifference in the wake of tragedies, somehow also being the saner and more well adjusted sibling; and an exploration of personalities, because what if nothing is the same, yet what truly matters always is, for Fate will never be denied.)

Notes

Hello!!!
This is my first fanfic in the fandom, bc long live SVSSS.

English is not my first language, so there definitely will be grammatical errors, especially since I tend to write in the middle of the night at 3, for peak productivity. So please gently point them out if you find any, your girl has a tender fragile heart.

Also, yes this is purely dressed as Crack.
I absolutely adore Shen Yuan as one does. Yes, he is not exactly... all there, as a badly adjusted, traumatised transmigrator tends to be.
Yes Shen Jiu would absolutely jump at the opportunity for them to leave the mountain and start a sheep farm because with the rate his gege is going, he will die of stress, (or kill someone too important and too noticeable in a very not unnoticeable way, all trying to keep off these flies from his gege.) But also, atleast he has a literal army of Sect Brothers and disciples at his disposal, who know the disaster that is Shen Yuan, and how to keep him alive on his peak god damn it, so that he can keep an eye on him, and also so he can't run off after another cool monster.

(Not to mention how he stumbles upon untold mysteries which he somehow resolves and which always always makes him end up in untold danger. Not to mention those annoying pests.)

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Waking Up

Shen Yuan was having a horrible day, and as much as he denied it, (which he did pretty well for someone who had a chronic overthinker as a brother ~~*looking at you Jiu-di;*~~ and an eternally guilty but never for the right reasons, older brother) he was a sarcastic mean little shit at heart.

His head disciple, Fu Xin, bless his heart, took one look at his polite smile and wave of fan, and immediately made himself scarce, to brew some flowery tea with hints of spice, sweetened with some Viper Headed Spider's honey, ~~*and also to warn off the other disciples*~~.

(A strangled yelp, and a horrified,

"Why the fuck are you adding Viper Headed Spider's Honey to your tea?"

"It adds that little kick to the tea, doesn't it didi?" He parries, calmly drinking the tea.

"It's poisonous."

"We're cultivators."

A choked off noise continued to come from his little didi's throat. He was so cute when he was concerned, almost as cute when he was trying to bare his claws and scratch at the world like a little black kitten, but, shhh, didi didn't like to talk about that.

"I am not a damn kitten," he hisses, just proving my point.

"I poisoned the..."

"I know."

"And ruined the..."

"Yes didi."

A frustrated growl resounds.

He chuckles fondly before hiding it behind a prim lift of the fan, which A-Jiu immediately tries to rip and see past.

So cute.

As if he didn't burn down the entire Qiu household the moment they went for his cute precious little didi. As if he didn't steal from the age of five just to feed him, before, Qi-ge found them.

As if he didn't sneak in to the slaver's cart his parents sold his days old didi to, despite him being the first born male heir of the wealthy Shens, just to see him safe. As if he wouldn't do anything to keep him happy and safe, ~~and smiling and happy and safe, Luo Binghe being fucking damned.~~)

So it was a bad day. He woke up on the wrong side of the bed, the curtains that shielded his windows were not pulled properly and the scorching summer sunlight that woke him up at god-damned ass-o-clock certainly didn't help matters. He had to wear atleast 7 layers of clothes otherwise both his didi, and his erstwhile Shizun, may her soul be at peace in the heavens, might come and murder him in cold blood.

(Well, not really. Harp about propriety, sure, but they really were so like the monsters he adored; dangerous, but so very pretty and perfectly docile if you knew how to calm them, if you knew what made them tick.)

Not to mention the unbearable heat. He had thought all the peaks had good weather throughout the year. *Fucking Airplane and his shitty writing.*

He was tempted to just reach out and twirl his fan into an elegant rainstorm. But that would disturb the natural habitat of the creatures on his peak, especially the lovely, Frost Skinned Fire Frog, not to mention the Lily Sprouting Axolotl, whose saliva was needed to sprout the Flesh Eating Fire Lilies, that were used to create xianxia burn creams.

And then Mu Qingfan would pout at him, (*"He is the most neutral person I have ever seen in my life, ge." "His eyes have gone all round," "His eyes are round," "He is so precious," "He is older than you," "So virtuous and helpful," "He definitely helped me poison those merchants who were trying to ambush Shang Qinghua that time," "Simply so pure," "You are delusional."*)

And he would have to send his disciples to bring new batches of the Lily Sprouting Axolotl, from deep in the Huang forests and the cute little dumb sheep disciples would definitely get confused between the clearly very distinguishable Axolotls,

("They look literally the same from the outside," " Well of course, it needs to be differentiated by the bright blue spot in the middle of the tongue." "Ge, there's, thousands of Axolotl's there." "It's their natural habitats," "..." "...what?" "There are atleast three different Axolotls of the exact same colour, and twenty different with the same general colour out of the thousands of breeds of them," "....yes? It's a learning exercise?" "....I can't believe I am defending those brats who call themselves your disciples...")

The point was, it clearly started off as a bad day, and he was about to make it, everyone's problem.

Chapter 2: Working up a Meeting

Chapter Summary

Just Shen Jiu, enjoying Shen Jiu things.

Chapter Notes

Ling You Peak - Beast Taming Peak
If Shen Yuan was there in PIDW canonically, he would definitely be from the Beast Taming Peak.

Yes I headcanon Yue Qi as someone, who doesn't understand exactly why Shen Jiu was angry at him, just that he is. You were refusing to give him an explanation as to why you didn't come back and Shen Jiu being the catastrophiser that he is, is obviously taking anything you do and blowing it out of proportion because he doesn't understand why you are doing what you are doing and then are refusing to tell him.

God fucking damn it, don't wait till he almost dies, just tell him.

And also, Yue Qi's attitude is one that I find problematic. It comes off as if he is a good guy then goes on and does the one thing that Shen Jiu has been asking him not to do since the beginning of his journey at Cang Qiong. Do NOT call that guy XiaoJiu. He has trauma associated with that word and A-Luo, to the point he would voluntarily and sadistically abuse his own disciples when these particular traumas are triggered.
Avoid the fucking landmines practically labelled in red.
He wallows in self pity while making mistakes that Shen Jiu has been shouting at him not to make for most part of their lives. Like fucking hell, get a grip.
I know you are a traumatised little kitten who did his best but Shen Jiu is more so.
Please be considerate of your Xiao Jiu's feelings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was enjoying his peace and quiet in his serene little bamboo house, with a perfectly brewed cup of floral tea, courtesy of the ladies downtown, before he was interrupted. He was going to make the life of whoever was interrupting him, this early in the morning, a living hell. He glared at the offensive noise on the door.

("What did the poor door ever do to you didi?" "..." "Glaring at it won't make whoever is outside, go away you know." "Stop laughing you slow brained nincompoop," "Aww, that was almost nice. You do love me," "Shut up.")

A small voice spoke up.

"Shizun."

Ming Fan. That child was dead meat.

"Enter," He says irritated.

"Greetings Shizun. This disciple w.. wanted to inform you of some proceedings over at Ling You Peak,"

The boy spoke with remarkable composure in face of his rapidly declining mood. Yet he was in no mood to appreciate his mettle or his obvious fear. What on earth had his gege done this early in the morning?

"He appears to be.. in a particularly elusive spirit today," He manages out.

Oh...

Oh..

If he played it right, this.. this could be very entertaining. After all there was a reason he was let loose on the masses only when they needed to be *dealt* with. Not that he knew it. He was so easily distracted, his dear gege.

Yue Fucking Qingyuan had been on his last nerves all week with his sad puppy look. As if that would make up for him trying to bribe him to keep quiet about their shared past as no-name slaves.

But Liu Qingge... that fucking muscle headed brute had dared to attack him on his own peak, *again*, daring to call it a *spar*. And then dared to call him out on his tricks that had helped him *win*. Calling them dirty and cheap. As if anything mattered other than the fact that he was *alive*, with that brute attacking him, that he won.

Oh, he would *ruin* them both. And it was going to be so satisfying.

He knew just what to do.

Yue Qingyuan was drawn out of his paperwork as his frazzled head disciple tried to tremulously announce the presence of his Xiao Jiu. In his office. *Voluntarily*. He was *so happy*.

He immediately abandoned his paperwork in favour of standing up and greeting his Xiao Jiu, effervescently happy.

*("What the fuck? Is he **glowing**?" "That's just happiness." "Shh... they can hear you. You don't want Shen shishu catching you, do you?" "..." "..." "Oh god, he is **smirking**." **"I am not competent enough to deal with this."**)*

"Zhangmen shixiong, call a Sect Meeting about the Immortal Alliance Conference," Xiao Jiu demands, so very beautiful in his fluttering green robes.

"Of course, Xiao Jiu. I will do so immediately. Did you want anything else?"

He would do anything to keep him standing here with him, talking to him, basking in his presence.

(He had once begged and begged his Shizun to somehow take on the Shen brothers; speckled with blood, wild defiance in their eyes; into the Sect. To do anything but leave them on the streets. ~~He would not leave them. Never again. He would quit the Sect if need be.~~ His Shizun must have seen something because his notoriously difficult and picky Shizun merely.... agreed.)

Xiao Jiu hissed and puffed up in anger as he tended to, "Do not call me that."

"Yes shidi." He replied dutifully.

He was angry at him again. That's okay. He could be as angry as he wanted as long as he was here, protected by anything his Sect had at it's disposal. Anger meant he was alive to be angry at him. That he still felt something in his heart, for him, enough to find himself angry. He didn't expect anything less. He dared not expect anything more. More would mean he was forgiven, and his mistake was not one to be forgiven or forgotten.

He twirled angrily and stomped out of his Office, presumably back to his Peak. He really wanted his Xiao Jiu to spend more time here. But he was already gone. No matter, he would see him again soon.

———

The fan in his hand creaked. Fu Xin squeaked.

"An impromptu Sect Leader Meeting. Wonderful," said a sibilant voice.

Neither of them said anything further. The silence stretched on.

"Well, can't keep the Sect Leader waiting now, can we? Fu Xin," He eyes his current Head Disciple with enough scrutiny to make the Long Tongued Fire Hydrangea, planted in his office fidget in its pot.

"Yes shizun...?" He whispered as confidently as possible for a mere 15 year old boy.

"Let's pay my martial siblings a visit and see what they want to *discuss*. ***Out of schedule***."

Fu Xin whimpered. Was this what Ming Fan shixiong meant by braving the trenches?

"Yes shizun."

Chapter End Notes

Shen Jiu: (menacingly happy) I am going to ruin a man's career.
Yue Qi: cheers
Shen Jiu: The man in question is you.
Yue Qi: cheers harder

This has always been the case.

No you can not convince me otherwise.

Chapter 3: The Sudden Meeting

Chapter Summary

The Meeting happens. Shen Yuan is not pleased. Shen Jiu very much is.

Chapter Notes

Qing 清 - clear, pure
Qiū 秋 - Autumn
Chun 春–spring

I like the way Shen Jiu is Autumn while Shen Yuan is Spring. So that will be their names.

I was too lazy to research what the Artificer Peak's name was so it goes unnamed.

Ling You and Qian Cao have an active collaboration where Ling You supplies materials and Qian Cao makes them into medicinal and(or) other useful products. It's a highly profitable trade along side the alcohol and the artifact selling one.

I am trying to draw out the differences in their personalities. Like Shen Jiu would unrepentantly steal or fight or endure (Qiu mansion) to make sure they all survived. Shen Yuan on the other hand, has had his 21'st century morality chipped away from him when he saw his parents selling off the cute little kid, who he once held in his arms, (who reminded him so much of his little meimei) that he had immediately rebelled the idea of letting that happen. But he couldn't stop it, being a kid himself, so he would do anything, to protect him. It eventually included Qi-ge. He saw something happening and in true Shen Yuan fashion who had read so many revenge plots and politics and harem drama in PIDW, immediately went to town on those who dared to threaten him and his, in a way that can't be connected back to him. Shen Jiu adores his feral Gege.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Greetings, Zhangmen shixiong," said Shen Yuan — formally Shen Qingchun — as he saluted the Sect Leader, every movement crisp enough to cut glass.

Yue Qingyuan smiled, welcoming as always, and gestured for him to sit.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, in this tableau was unusual. Unless, of course, you knew him. Unless you knew that faint glint in his eye, the near-imperceptible tension in his hand as it

snapped open his fan. That was the kind of look that promised someone's suffering — refined, methodical, politely justified suffering.

Shen Jiu knew that look. Shen Yuan was displeased. A fact which most of the other Sect Leaders only noticed when it was already too late — when Shen QingChun was halfway down yet another path of *righteous destruction.*

(Unlike ~~Qi-ge,~~ who scolded them like one would a favourite pet — gentle rebukes, followed by apologetic smiles that made amends without meaning them. His passivity allowed them to get away with anything, while Yuan-ge's storms razed anything that dared to bare a claw at any of them.

"Didi, you're hurt," Yuan-ge had murmured once, distressed, wiping the dirt and blood from his little brother's face with a gentleness usually reserved for prized jade.

"I got us food," Shen Jiu had declared proudly.

"From those brats, didi?" Shen Yuan's tone was careful, concerned.

"They were making trouble for Qi-ge. Demanding he apologise and stuff — even though he was the one who got the food in the first place," Jiu huffed, petty as always.

"You always get into fights with them, didi." The scolding was light — too light to hide the faint annoyance beneath.

"They're still making him apologise! For me taking what was ours," he whined.

"I can see that," Yuan-ge replied, pulling out some random leaves he must've picked up three streets away and rubbing them over the cuts.

"He shouldn't have to apologise for nothing."

His brother's hand had paused for a heartbeat, before resuming its gentle work. Shen Jiu had slumped under the careful touch, burying his face into his beloved gege's shoulder, muttering,

"It's not fair."

A soft hum. Fingers ruffling his hair.

"This world isn't," came the quiet reply.

Even then, he'd known.

Qi-ge had said nothing, merely sharing a faint smile when Shen Jiu sulked later. They'd divided the meagre food among the three of them, talking lightly, pretending the world wasn't cruel. At least they had eaten. He'd do it again — in a heartbeat.

The next day, that same gang of boys had wordlessly handed over their share of food to a baffled Qi-ge, muttering something about sharing. The main instigator was conspicuously absent. Yuan-ge had never looked more satisfied.)

Shen Jiu merely leaned back and sipped his tea, already deciding what bribes to prepare for the aftermath.

As Liu Qingge strode in last — like always — and dropped gracelessly into his seat, the room finally settled.

This was, without exaggeration, the most pointless meeting he'd ever endured. *List of disciples* this, *timeframes* that, *skills, Huan Hua*, blah, blah. He'd have paid attention if Luo Binghe were even present for it. But the Plot wouldn't start for another two years, which meant this whole "Conference" was just a tedious display of resources and inflated egos.

He'd known Shang Qinghua — *that plagiaristic hack of an Airplane* — was bad with pacing, but this was suicidal. He had then started droning about budgets and infrastructure, Shen Yuan was ready to unleash a Mandrake Lizard in the middle of the hall just to make them *shut up* in this unbearable heat.

By the time Liu Qingge snapped at Shen Jiu over something that sounded like "*teaching abilities*," and "*discipline*", Shen Yuan's patience — already thin as gossamer — finally gave.

"Zhangmen shixiong," he said pleasantly.

The silence that followed was sharp enough to bleed on.

"Was there any particular issue you wished to raise in this unscheduled meeting?"

The sudden silence that followed didn't even make him blink.

Yue Qingyuan, ever the diplomat, smiled that weary, hopeful smile. "Ah, A-Yuan,"

"Shen shidi,"

His voice could cut glass. Yue Qingyuan persisted, his smile slightly dim,

"Shen shidi, it was merely to—"

"Was there any reason," Shen Yuan continued smoothly, "it could not have been discussed in the usual meeting, rather than this delightful interruption of my morning?"

A faint, terrified "*fuck*" sounded from somewhere in the background. Shen Yuan ignored it like a professional.

"Shidi," Yue Qingyuan began, adopting that infuriatingly gentle tone — the same one you'd use with a startled rabbit or a ticking bomb. "The disciple lists must be finalized before Huan Hua and the Artificer Peak's disciples are participating after more than—"

"Were the lists *demanded early* by Huan Hua Palace?"

"No, but—"

"Were the funds for Artificer Peak *insufficient* for their preparation?"

"Not as such—"

"Or were general funds lacking?"

Before Yue Qingyuan could open his mouth again, Shang Qinghua, the brave idiot, spoke up — voice trembling but alive with the fatal impulse to explain.

"Actually, the funds are running short because of the slow night-hunting season and the rebuilding of Bai Zhan Peak after—"

"Oh," Shen Yuan purred. "So the problem lies with the *unruly* Bai Zhan disciples."

Across the table, Liu Qingge froze.

"It's just buildings," he tried, jaw tight. "They're meant to fight—"

"Yes. To fight," Shen Yuan agreed, voice sweet as lotus wine. "Not to indiscriminately destroy their own infrastructure. Or am I mistaken about the definition of '*discipline*'?"

Liu Qingge's knuckles whitened on the table. "You—"

"And you, Zhangmen shixiong," Shen Yuan turned back with a smile that could blind. "What is your solution to this problem that we have been discussing for two shichen now? Because, to my recollection, I have yet to hear one proposed."

The room was silent. The kind of silence that comes after lightning and before thunder.

Shang Qinghua looked like he wanted to crawl under the table and die quietly. Shen Jiu had his face in his hand, laughing softly into his palm.

Yue Qingyuan inhaled, long-suffering. "Shen shidi, perhaps you might consider—"

"I have considered," Shen Yuan interrupted, that polite mask still flawlessly in place. "And I'm beginning to wonder if perhaps Ling You Peak should withdraw its medicinal supplies for a month or two. After all, if Bai Zhan Peak can destroy its own buildings, I'm sure they can learn to mend their own injuries as well."

“Shen QingChun.” Shen Jiu’s voice cut through then — amused, warning, the sound of a leash snapping tight before it breaks.

Yue Qingyuan looked between them helplessly. “There’s no need to threaten—”

“Who’s threatening?” Shen Yuan said mildly, snapping his fan shut. “I’m simply suggesting a very reasonable cause-and-effect. Destruction has its consequences, Zhangmen shixiong. Even cultivators must learn that eventually.”

The tension hung like storm clouds — heavy, electric, ready to split open.

Shang Qinghua was frantically scribbling notes, muttering under his breath about “canon divergence” and “death flags.” Liu Qingge looked seconds from standing up and drawing his sword.

And Shen Yuan — sweet, smiling, immaculate Shen Yuan — sat there, utterly composed, sipping his tea as if he hadn’t just verbally dismantled the entire upper hierarchy of Cang Qiong Mountain.

Shen Jiu smirked quietly into his sleeve.

“Oh,” he muttered. “He’s doing *the thing* again.”

Fu Xin, hovering anxiously the edge of the room, whispered, “What *thing*?”

“The one where he decides to teach everyone *manners*,” Shen Jiu said. “*By ruining their week.*”

The silence stretched, brittle and sharp, until even the faint rustle of silk sleeves felt too loud.

Yue Qingyuan cleared his throat gently — the sound of a man stepping into a den of sleeping beasts.

“Shen shidi,” he began, voice as warm and even as he could manage, “your point is well-taken. However, the Bai Zhan disciples—”

“—require stricter supervision,” Shen Yuan finished for him, tone so mild it almost passed for agreement. “Of course, I understand. I’m sure their shizun will take that to heart.”

Liu Qingge’s head snapped up, the scrape of his chair against the floor slicing through the quiet. “Are you implying I don’t—”

“I am stating,” Shen Yuan interrupted, “that perhaps if you spent less time *rebuilding* your peak or fighting monsters *outside* of said peak for months on end, and more time managing

your disciples, this problem would not exist. Or do you intend to test the durability of every structure in the sect through repeated destruction?"

A low growl built in Liu Qingge's throat. "Watch your words, Shen Qingchun."

"Oh, believe me," Shen Yuan smiled, sharp and sweet as frostbite, "I always do."

"Enough."

Yue Qingyuan's voice was soft, but it carried the unmistakable weight of command. "Shen shidi, Liu shidi — this is not productive."

Shang Qinghua's quill snapped in his fingers. "Oh heavens," he whispered, "we're all going to die."

Shen Jiu snorted audibly. "You might, yes. The rest of us have higher survival instincts."

Shang Qinghua sank lower in his seat. "I didn't sign up for this—"

"No," Shen Yuan said absently, folding his fan. "You wrote this."

That earned him a strangled sound from Shang Qinghua and a sharp look from Yue Qingyuan, who had long given up on understanding half of what Shen Yuan said when he was in this mood.

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Shen shidi, I assure you, we will handle Bai Zhan Peak's expenditures. I simply thought it best to have all the Peak Lords together to coordinate the final preparations for the Conference."

"Mm," Shen Yuan hummed. "So you thought gathering twelve of the most temperamental individuals in one suffocating room for two shichen of redundant discussion was the best solution. My, Zhangmen shixiong, you truly are an optimist."

He rose smoothly, sleeves whispering against the floor as he bowed with impeccable form. "If there is nothing further, I shall return to my Peak. My beasts are far less talkative, and infinitely more useful."

(Some day would come when,

"The Little Beast deserved—"

"If you call him a beast, hand him to me. I know how to tame and turn one to use better than you think."

"No. He's a threat—"

"Didi, let me take him from you. I will see to it. Trust me."

A long breath. "Alright."

Not today, though — that reckoning would come later.)

The words landed like falling stones.

Yue Qingyuan opened his mouth, closed it, then nodded faintly. “Very well, Shen shidi.”

“Shen QingChun.”

It was Shen Jiu’s voice that stopped him at the door.

He didn’t turn, only half-tilted his head — a polite, dangerous invitation.

“You’ve caused quite the stir,” Shen Jiu drawled, tone just this side of lazy. “Zhangmen-shixiong may need a stronger heart after today.”

A soft huff of amusement. “Oh? And here I thought you’d enjoy the spectacle.”

Shen Jiu’s lips curved, the rare smile for once reaching his eyes. “Enjoyment is such a crude word. Let’s just say… it was enlightening.”

For a heartbeat, silence stretched between them — taut, aware, edged in shared understanding neither would voice. Shen Yuan was his older brother after all. There was no doubt in his mind that his little Jiu-di was behind today's meeting.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, didi,” Shen Yuan said finally, unfolding his fan with a whisper of silk.

“Mm.” Shen Jiu’s gaze followed him to the door, unreadable. “It already has.”

He left then, fan snapping open with a soft snap. The faint scent of venom-spiced honey lingered in his wake — sweetness concealing the sting beneath.

The moment the door shut behind him, the room seemed to exhale all at once.

Shang Qinghua collapsed forward onto the table. “Holy shit, I thought he was going to skin us alive.”

Liu Qingge crossed his arms, scowling fiercely to disguise the fact that his pulse hadn't quite steadied, or the fact that he was quite, disappointed at the way their conversation had ended. "He's too smug for his own good."

"Too smart for yours," Shen Jiu muttered, pouring himself another cup of tea. "You're lucky he only bites when he's bored."

"Shen shidi," Yue Qingyuan sighed, rubbing his temple, "perhaps next time you might warn me if he's in one of his moods?"

Shen Jiu arched an eyebrow. "Warn you? You're the one who scheduled a surprise meeting during a *heatwave*. You practically summoned him."

"…Ah."

"Mm."

They both turned to Shang Qinghua, who was still face-down on the table.

He mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like, "This wasn't in the plot…"

Outside, Shen Yuan walked leisurely through the cool shade of the corridor, the breeze catching the hem of his green robes. Fu Xin trailed behind him, quiet and pale.

"Shizun…" the boy ventured carefully. "Was… was the meeting successful?"

Shen Yuan smiled without turning. "Of course, my dear. Everyone learned something valuable today."

"What… what was that?"

"That," he said, voice soft as silk, "the next time someone calls a meeting without prior discussion, I'll make sure it's their *funeral rites* instead."

Fu Xin squeaked. His Shizun laughed — low, elegant, dangerous — and disappeared the corner.

Chapter End Notes

Shen Jiu : (Is annoyed by Yue Qingyuan and Liu Qingge)
Shen Jiu : (Plays Shen Yuan)

It's super effective.

Shen Yuan: This meeting could have been an email.

Chapter 4: A Gardener's Guide to Nuclear Fission

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe officially enters his own story. (Is it his story though?)

Chapter Notes

Yes the chapter name is a joke.

But mostly also like, Shen Yuan is like fangirling so hard while staying aloof, which is second nature by now. (Or a trauma response. Either. Both.)

Ok these are super under edited. But I just wrote the chapter and am super passionate abt the story so just posting it, cause if I stop writing, I will STOP writing. And I don't want that. Life is too boring otherwise.

Also, we are slowly introducing Luo Binghe. But System won't allow him to be anything other than a Qing Jing disciple courtesy of ✨character growth✨
So just assume the discuple selection has happened. The same shit went down, Liu Qingge wanted him, Ning YingYing wanted a shidi, Shen Jiu was petty. Voilà! One Luo Binghe on Qing Jing Peak.

Yes, like in canon, Shen Jiu considers Luo Binghe a valid threat, even though he was a child. Yes, he is still triggered by the A-Luo, YingYing calls Binghe. It's just, Shen Jiu responded to trauma by becoming an insecure, abusive and unrepentant asshole.
Good thing, Shen Yuan is here to the rescue! Bad thing is that Shen Yuan was also traumatised in fun ways in the Qiu manor. Whose repercussions I hope you were able to see in the first few chapters. We will build on that.
Yes I am trying to write plot. Yes, I too feel like my writing style is all over the place. Will this stop me?
Nah. I'd write.

Is this still humorous though?
Idk you tell me.

Also idk how much was translated but what I rly liked abt SVSSS was how a fun filled, humorous story was much more complex underneath and I am no MXTX, but Imma try my hand at that.

I hope Shen Yuan's feral energy is being translated over well here!

Okay without any further adieu..

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rumor mill of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect was a spiritual artifact in its own right. By the time a Qing Jing disciple stubbed their toe, Ling You Peak was already drafting a treatise on the spiritual significance of clumsy footwork.

Shen Yuan, therefore, was drowning in a flood of deeply upsetting intelligence.

- *"—still in the woodshed, even with the frost."*
- *"—Shizun broke another practice sword over his back. Said his posture was offensive."*
- *"—Ming Fan 'accidentally' pushed him into the latrine ditch again."*

Each report was a stab to his fangirl heart.

'He's a white lotus!' a voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like his own wailed. '*He's supposed to be pitifully beautiful, not pathetically septic!'*

Outwardly, Peak Lord Shen Qingchun took a serene sip of his Viper-Headed Spider honey tea. The contrast was, he had to admit, artistically jarring.

(Twenty seven years ago, in a cramped servant's room in the Qiu estate)

"Stop fussing, A-Jiu," a younger Shen Yuan whispered, dabbing a wet cloth on his little brother's split lip. His hands, though slender, were steady.

"He looked at you," Shen Jiu hissed, trembling with rage and pain. "He looked at you like you were… merchandise."

Shen Yuan's eyes, usually so bright with curiosity, went flat and cold. "Let him look," he said, his voice deceptively light. "The Qiu family's financial advisor seems to have made

several catastrophic errors. I hear the creditors are circling. They'll be selling things off soon to cover their debts. Perhaps even troublesome servants."

He smiled, a small, sharp thing. "But not us. We'll be long gone by then."

He was just contemplating the logistical challenges of weaponizing a swarm of non-lethal, but profoundly irirritating Earth Green Itching Midges when a familiar, obnoxious window blared in his vision.

`[ALERT: CRITICAL PLOT CHARACTER 'LUO BINGHE' CORRUPTION AT 18%. HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT CONFIRMED.]`

`[NEW QUEST: "A WINTER'S RESPITE." OBJECTIVE: TEMPORARILY RELOCATE PROTAGONIST FOR ONE LUNAR CYCLE.]`

`[REWARD: +500 B-POINTS. PENALTY FOR FAILURE: -5,000 B-POINTS.]`

`[NOTE: PERMANENT REASSIGNMENT UNAVAILABLE DUE TO 'WHITE LOTUS PROTECTION' PROTOCOL.]`

Shen Yuan leaned back, steepling his fingers. "Plot armor," he murmured to the empty room. "The original sin of narrative convenience."

He couldn't just snatch the boy. That would be… obvious. And his Jiu-di's resulting tantrum would be a localized natural disaster. He needed a pretext. A boring, bureaucratic, iron-clad pretext.

The next Peak Lord meeting delivered the perfect opportunity, wrapped in muscle-bound frustration.

"—useless!" Liu Qingge was snarling. "They can't take a hit. Qing Jing produces scholars who faint at the sight of their own shadow!"

'You over-caffeinated war-god,' Shen Yuan's inner monologue supplied, *'they are little fluffy sheep, especially the delicate white lotus protagonist, not your personal stress ball!'*

Outwardly, Shen Qingchun offered a mild, considering hum. "Liu-shidi makes a compelling point," he said, his voice a calm ripple in the turbulent room.

The silence was immediate and profound. Everyone agreed that Shen QingChun unironically supporting Liu Qingge was an event on par with the sun rising in the west.

Yue Qingyuan looked like he'd been handed a gift. "Shen-shidi, you have a suggestion?"

"Indeed." Shen Yuan set his teacup down with a soft, definitive click. "I propose a pilot program: 'Beast-Handling Fundamentals,' hosted on Ling You Peak. One disciple from each peak, for one lunar cycle. They will learn identification, safe approach, and care of non-hostile spiritual fauna. This builds practical field skills, spiritual awareness, and," he added, with a gracious nod to the Sect Leader, "inter-peak camaraderie."

It was a masterstroke of bureaucratic genius. So sensible. So dull. So utterly unassailable.

Yue Qingyuan’s face lit up. "A wonderful idea, Shen-shidi! Promoting unity and practical knowledge!"

The only dissenting voice was a silent, frigid glare from Shen Jiu. His fan had stilled.

"And which of my disciples," Shen Jiu's voice was deceptively soft, "have you deemed worthy of this… *enlightenment*?"

Shen Yuan met his brother's gaze, the barest hint of a challenge in his eyes. "Why, the one with the most… *potential*, of course. The new one. Luo Binghe. I've heard… *fascinating* things about his spiritual resilience."

The trap snapped shut.

(Over three decades ago, in a stinking alley)

The pouch of coins, heavy and embroidered with the crest of the richest family in town, felt like a live coal in Shen Jiu's hands. Next to it, the half-rotten bun seemed like a trifle.

"We can't keep this," Shen Jiu hissed, his voice tight. He wasn't looking at the food or the gold, but at his brother's face. "Qi-ge will just give us his share again. He's too soft."

"He's not soft, he's kind," Shen Yuan corrected, his tone infuriatingly calm as he broke the bun into three meticulously equal parts. "And we are not 'keeping' it. We are redistributing resources from those who have too much to those who have too little. It's basic economic theory."

"It's foolishness!" The word exploded from Shen Jiu, laced with a terror he couldn't voice.

They'll know it was us. They'll tear the city apart. They'll take you from me.

His knuckles were white around the pouch. This wasn't a mere stolen bun from the vendors, "Ge… they will know."

Shen Yuan's hands stilled. He finally looked up, and his eyes were not those of a scared child, but of a strategist who had already burned the maps of retreat. They were clear, certain, and utterly terrifying.

“It’s survival with philosophical justification,” he said, his voice dropping to a prim, steady whisper. “Now eat. And stop glaring. It gives you wrinkles.”

I can’t lose you, Shen Jiu thought, despair a cold stone in his gut.

Shen Yuan’s gaze held his, unwavering. *Trust me,* it said, a silent answer to his brother’s unspoken plea.

And Shen Jiu, against every screaming instinct for self-preservation, did. He always did. He took the piece of bun, the weight of the gold now a shared burden, and trusted his brother to burn the world down before it could burn them.

He would not how true that particular thought was until years later.

Luo Binghe arrived at Ling You Peak braced for a new, more sophisticated form of torment. He was met with beautiful, logical chaos.

And at the center of it all stood Shen Qingchun, unruffled and pristine, gently detaching a multi-legged moth from his sleeve.

"This lowly one greets Shen-shibo," Luo Binghe stammered, bowing deeply.

Shen Yuan regarded him for a long moment, his gaze analytical. "Rise. Your first lesson: the Qi-Sensitive Moss-Hopper. Their digestive byproducts are a precise bio-indicator of ambient spiritual fluctuations. You will log consistency, luminescence, and bounce coefficient."

Luo Binghe's mind blanked. "...Bounce coefficient, Shen-shibo?"

"A critical metric," Shen Yuan confirmed, as if discussing the finer points of sword philosophy.

This was not the hell he knew. This was a new, bewildering dimension of madness. Yet, as days passed, a pattern emerged. The "nutrient bars" soothed his aching core. The "logbook" taught him focus. When Ming Fan arrived to "inspect" his progress, the Harmony Slime turned a violent grey and shrieked. Shen-shibo had simply appeared, handed Luo Binghe a cup of oddly calming tea, and said, "Meditate. The dissonance will cease when the hostile intent departs."

It worked.

Shen Qingchun's care was unnerving, meticulous, and delivered with the detached air of a master botanist tending a rare orchid. He adjusted Luo Binghe's diet, had him collect Viper-Headed Spider honey using enchanted gloves and a specific humming frequency, and assigned him to brush the affectionate—if occasionally bone-crushing—Rockbadger Pups to "build rapport with larger fauna."

It was terrifying. It was bizarre. And for the first time since his mother died, Luo Binghe felt… seen. Not as a street rat or a punching bag, but as a human being to be understood and cared for.

(The night they were brought to Cang Qiong)

The Peak Lords looked down at them, two feral, blood-streaked boys holding onto each other like lifelines. Shen Jiu was all defiant snarls. Shen Yuan was just… watching, his eyes calculating the dimensions of the room, the exits, the potential threats.

"We will take them both," the then Sect Leader said to a desperate Yue Qi.

Later, in their new, clean quarters, Shen Jiu whispered, "Do you *trust* him? Qi-ge?"

Shen Yuan was neatly folding their new disciple robes. "I trust that he brought us here. I trust that we are safer inside these walls than outside them. The rest…" He handed Shen Jiu his set. "The rest, we will handle. Together. As we always have."

The fragile peace was shattered by a wave of killing intent that made the Harmony Slime vanish with a *pop*.

Shen Jiu stood in the doorway of Shen Yuan's office, his rage a physical chill.

"You are *meddling*," he hissed, forgoing all pretense.

Shen Yuan looked up from a scroll detailing the mating calls of Frost Toads. "A-Jiu. Your dramatic entrances are always so… refreshing."

"You feed him, you monitor his dreams, you fortify his core. You are sharpening a blade that will be turned on all of us!" Shen Jiu’s voice trembled on the edge of something raw. "Can you not see the monster in his eyes?"

Shen Yuan's expression was one of genuine confusion. "I see a child whose foundation is cracked from neglect. I am providing stability."

"Stability?" Shen Jiu's laugh was a sharp, broken thing. "You call this *stability*? Watching him, measuring him, cataloging his every reaction as if he's one of your *specimens*? Is this compassion, Yuan-ge, or is it just the most elaborate experiment you've ever run?"

The air in the room grew still and heavy. Shen Yuan placed his brush down with deliberate care.

"If you are so convinced he is a monster," he said, his voice soft but edged with a terrible clarity, "then stop provoking him and being surprised when he snarls. Hand him to me. Let me teach him that power doesn't have to be born from pain. Let me show him a different path. *Trust me*."

(The first time Shen Yuan set the Qiu estate on fire, it was an accident. The second time, a week later, was a lesson.)

Soot streaked Shen Jiu's face like war paint. Shen Yuan wiped it away with a torn piece of cloth, his hands unnervingly steady even as his own heart hammered a wild, triumphant rhythm against his ribs.

"They won't look for us," he murmured, his voice low and even. "They'll be too busy looking for *who* did it. They'll assume it was rivals, bandits… anyone but the slaves they thought they owned."

Shen Jiu stared. He was used to his brother—the one who could name every star and recite obscure poetry, who was awkward with people but spoke the language of forgotten things. But the boy in front of him now was different. The calm wasn't placid; it was the stillness of a deep, dark lake that had just swallowed a mountain whole. He wouldn't have the words for it until years later, standing on the polished floors of Cang Qiong Mountain: this was the sharp, cold clarity of a mind honed by soul-crushing desperation.

"Gege…" The name was a breath, half awe, half terror.

Shen Yuan pulled him close, tucking him against his side, a barrier against the distant roar of the flames and the world that made them necessary. The heat of the burning manor warmed their backs.

"It's alright, A-Jiu," he whispered into his brother's hair, the promise absolute. "I'll always burn it down for you. Whatever it is."

Outside the door, Luo Binghe, sent to fetch a specific logbook, stood frozen.

Power not born from pain. A different path.

The words were so alien, so beautiful, they felt like a physical ache.

He heard a long, shuddering exhale from his Shizun. "No. He is *my* disciple. My responsibility. Your… *interference*… ends tomorrow."

Shen Yuan simply tilted his head. "A shame. He was promising."

When Luo Binghe returned to Qing Jing Peak, the woodshed felt smaller, the disdain sharper. But he was different. His spiritual veins hummed with a new stability. The memory of a man who looked at him not with contempt, but with a terrifying, sincere focus, was a shield.

He was no longer just the little beast. He was a subject of Shen Qingchun's… interest. And as he knelt in the cold, dark shed, a new, fierce spark ignited in his chest. He would become strong. Not just to survive, but to deserve the bizarre, unsettling, and utterly unique form of salvation he had been offered.

On Ling You Peak, Shen Yuan reviewed the final entries in Luo Binghe's logbook. The System chimed.

`[QUEST COMPLETE: “A WINTER’S RESPITE.” CORRUPTION METER REDUCED TO 8%. +500 B-POINTS AWARDED.]`

`[WARNING: HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT RE-ENGAGED. CORRUPTION ACCELERATION LIKELY.]`

Shen Yuan closed the logbook. The System's chime was an insult. Its point-rewards were a mockery. The only metric that mattered was the fragile light of hope he'd seen in a boy's eyes, now being sent back into the dark.

He looked toward Qing Jing Peak. The scholarly detachment he wore like a robe fell away, leaving something older and far more dangerous. It was the same feeling as hearing a whimper from a locked room. The same feeling as seeing a bruise on his little brother's arm.

"Fine," he said, the word soft as a sigh and hard as steel. "We'll do this the *hard way*."

Chapter End Notes

No one:
Absolutely no one:
(Kid with tragic backstory)
Shen Yuan: That one. (shakes the traumatised kid like a pepsi can) that one. I want that one.

Chapter 5: In which the Brothers go to War

Chapter Summary

Exactly what the title suggests.

Chapter Notes

Shen Yuan's canonical obsessive love for Luo Binghe vs Shen Yuan's desperate protective love for Shen Jiu : Fight!

Idk if you felt it or not, Shen Yuan is oblivious (in many matters, especially of the heart) but also like it's not true obliviousness; it's a radically different moral and operational framework, especially since he knows what's coming. (I hope you'll see what I mean in this chapter)

Also Shen JIu's core is a lot more stable due to Shen Yuan's timely intervention with may they be plants or rare animal ingredients; and also other things not yet revealed. So he is not as prone to qi deviations as in canon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The *hard* way, Shen Yuan was discovering, was a two-way street paved with bureaucratic forms, spiritual venom, and meticulously gathered data.

His opening salvo was not a reckless explosion, ~~(as tempted as he was to do that)~~, but a precision strike. For three days, he had his most discrete disciples log the activities on the Qing Jing practice fields, cross-referenced with the acoustic output of the newly arrived *Screaming Lotus-Eaters*. The results were irrefutable.

He presented his findings to a flummoxed Yue Qingyuan in a beautifully bound report.

"As you can see in Figure 1-A," Shen Yuan explained, pointer in hand, "the Lotus-Eaters' vocalizations remain at a baseline of 60 decibels during general meditation and scholarly pursuit. However," he continued, flipping to a chart, "observe the spike to 110 decibels—a 83.3% increase—which occurs precisely during Head Disciple Ming Fan's 'disciplinary corrections' of the newer disciples, specifically during his poetry recitations. The correlation coefficient is a staggering 0.98."

He flipped to another page. "Conversely, note the drop to a near-silent 45 decibels during Disciple Ning Yingying's guqin practice. The data suggests the creatures are not merely noise-sensitive, but are reacting to specific, discordant spiritual frequencies generated by pedagogical... let's call it *'over-enthusiasm'*."

Yue Qingyuan stared at the graphs, his face a portrait of a man watching two cats play chess. "A-Yuan... Shen-shidi," he began, voice thick with confusion. "This is... highly specific."

"Merely observant, Zhangmen-shixiong," Shen Yuan replied, serenely sipping his spider-honey tea. "The correlation is statistically significant. A temporary moratorium on corporal punishment and mandatory poetry recitations would be the most prudent way to test my hypothesis. For the sake of the sect's acoustic harmony and the structural integrity of your windows."

(The first time he'd presented a plan this detailed, they were ten and five, shivering in a leaky shed.)

"The night guard," Shen Yuan had whispered, drawing lines in the dirt with a stick, "changes at the hour of the boar. He always stops to drink from the well. That's a seventy-three-second

window. The kitchen door lock is rusted; it jams if you lift it just so. We take only the leftover buns from the very back. They won’t be missed until morning.”

Shen Jiu had stared at the dirt map, his small face pinched with fear. He knew the ones they could plausibly steal, were the rotten ones, but after Qi-ge's recent bout of illness, they couldn't afford to give him anything but the freshest food they could possibly steal. he *knew* it and yet,

“If we’re caught—”

“We won’t be,” Shen Yuan had said, with a certainty he didn’t feel. “The data is sound. Habits are a cage, A-Jiu. Men in power are the most trapped of all. They trust their routines more than their own eyes.” He tapped the stick on the crude drawing of the guard. “We are not betting on our luck. We are betting on their arrogance.”

He’d trusted him. They’d gotten the buns.)

Shen Jiu's reaction was not the cold silence Shen Yuan had anticipated (and honestly he felt foolish for thinking his didi would just sit back). It was a counter-attack, delivered with a legalistic pedantry that was, frankly, beautiful in its malice.

The very next day, a scroll arrived on Shen Yuan's desk via a Qing Jing disciple who looked like he was delivering his own death warrant. It was a formal complaint, filed by Peak Lord Shen Qingqiu.

"Regarding the Unlicensed Breeding and Release of Class-3 Hazardous Fauna on Sect Grounds," it began.

It cited seven separate, obscure sect bylaws regarding ecological preservation and inter-peak spiritual pollution. It argued, with infuriating logic, that the Screaming Lotus-Eaters were not a natural migratory event but a deliberate act of ecological sabotage by Ling You Peak, "*known for its unorthodox and often hazardous breeding programs.*" It demanded that Shen Qingchun be held financially responsible for all damages to Qing Jing's spiritual bamboo and for the *"psychological distress and auditory trauma"* inflicted upon his disciples, complete with fabricated testimonials from disciples claiming to have developed tinnitus.

The *audacity* was *breathtaking*.

`[WARNING: TARGET "SHEN JIU" HAS INITIATED COUNTER-LITIGATION PROTOCOLS. NARRATIVE COHESION AT RISK. HOST'S PETITION HAS BEEN FLAGGED FOR

"FURTHER REVIEW."]`

'He's biting back,' Shen Yuan thought, a strange mix of irritation and pride flaring in his chest. *'Good.'*

(He remembered a different document, from their early days in the Qiu household.

Qiu Jianluo, in a fit of pique, had accused a visiting merchant—a kind man who had once slipped Shen Jiu a sweet—of insulting the family's honour. He drew up a false contract, claiming the merchant owed a crippling debt to the Qius, and was preparing to have him thrown into debtor's prison. Shen Jiu, who had been forced to serve them that day, was trembling, anticipating the man's ruin.

That night, Shen Yuan didn't sleep. He found the contract in Qiu Jianluo's study. He didn't destroy it. Instead, with a hand steadied by a cold, clear fury, he added a single, flawlessly forged clause that subtly shifted the *"debt"* from the kind merchant to one of Qiu Jianluo's own business partners—a man known for his viciousness. He placed it back exactly as he found it.

The next day, Qiu Jianluo, too arrogant to re-read his own work, sent the contract. The resulting legal battle between the two wealthy families consumed Qiu Jianluo for weeks.

The kind merchant was forgotten

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Shen Jiu had found him later, hiding in the library. "How did you know it would work?" he'd whispered, his eyes wide. Shen Yuan, the smell of ink and fear clinging to him, had looked up, his gaze unsettlingly calm. "I read the law," he said simply. "And I know arrogant men. They never check their own traps.")

He responded not by retracting his petition, but by escalating. He mobilized the *"Cross-Peak Safety Collaboration"* under the guise of concern after a Bai Zhan disciple (who may or may not have been nudged by a carefully placed Ling You earth-spirit) stumbled into a Qing Jing railing. Artificers and An Ding Peak disciples, under the guidance of Qian Cao healers, descended, *"fortifying"* Qing JIng Peak, (the woodshed, the kitchen, anywhere Binghe could be found really,) into a cosy stone mountain and padding every vaguely sharp surface.

Shen Jiu's retaliation was swift and deeply personal. The next shipment of Viper-Headed Spider honey for Shen Yuan's tea was *"accidentally"* contaminated during a *"routine Qing Jing quality inspection"* with a neutralizing agent that turned the complex, venomous sweetness into the bland, common taste of clover honey.

(The first time their food had been poisoned, it was by a rival street gang. Shen Jiu had vomited for hours. Shen Yuan had held his head, his own small body trembling with a rage so vast it felt cold. The next day, the gang's leader was found paralyzed, a rare and curiously specific river-plant toxin in his system. No one ever connected it to the quiet, bookish boy who never fought back. A-Jiu had looked at him afterwards, with a fierce, burning understanding mirroring in his own.

No one touches what's ours.)

The war was on then.

Shen Yuan's covert care for Luo Binghe became the central battlefield. He had a blanket woven from *Dream-Weaving Goat* fur delivered via a *Mist-Walker Weasel*. Shen Jiu, in response, *"discovered"* a *"quarantine issue"* with the weasel and had the Beast-Taming Peak's access to Qing Jing's lower slopes temporarily revoked.

Shen Yuan then began his *"research walks,"* under the pretext of observing a rare *Six-Winged Sky-Carp* to offer Luo Binghe quiet, cutting advice and stabilizing talismans. "Your root is

unstable. You compensate with your upper dantian. It makes you look aggressive. A defensive posture is often mistaken for a challenge."

The boy was thriving under the onslaught of this bizarre, silent war. He was confused, yes, but also healthier and more grounded than ever.

It all came to a head during the Peak Lord meeting where Liu Qingge announced his campaign to the Wailing Ghost Ravine.

Shen Yuan saw his chance. "An excellent initiative, Liu-shidi. However, given the increased strength of the foes, a two-Peak operation would be more prudent. Qing Jing's knowledge of demonic arrays and seals would be a valuable asset."

The silence was absolute. Shang Qinghua dropped his scroll.

Shen Jiu's fan froze mid-flutter. "What."

"Your disciples' theoretical knowledge is unparalleled," Shen Yuan continued, his expression one of pure, dispassionate logic. "A practical application under Liu-shidi's protection would be an invaluable learning experience. And it would get them off the mountain," he added, as if it were a minor afterthought. "The Screaming Lotus-Eaters' sensitivity to spiritual dissonance seems to be increasing. A change of scenery might be the only way to prevent a full-scale sonic event."

It was a checkmate in front of the entire council. Refusal would look like cowardice. Acceptance meant leaving his peak—and Luo Binghe—unguarded.

Shen Jiu's eyes locked with his brother's. The fury in them was a cold, promised violence. But his voice, when he spoke, was smooth as poisoned silk. "Of course. This shidi would be... *honored*... to assist Liu-shixiong." The way he said *"honored"* sounded like a death threat.

(It was the same tone he'd used the day they were sold—that chilling, preternatural calm that had settled over a child too young for such hatred, aimed at the merchant who had torn them from Qi-ge. A promise of future retribution, etched into the line of a small, stubborn jaw. Shen Yuan had recognized it then, and he recognized it now, a shard of that same icy fury now aimed directly at him.

He had just become the merchant.

The thought lodged in his gut, cold and heavy. If the realization left him sick, if he had spent the night retching up the bitter truth that his brother now saw him as the enemy, the architect of a new betrayal… well, that was a shame he would swallow alone. No one else needed to know how thoroughly his own strategy had turned to poison his heart.)

Yue Qingyuan, blissfully unaware of the subtext but desperate to please, beamed. "A superb idea! It is settled!"

As the meeting adjourned, Shen Jiu swept past Shen Yuan. He didn't pause, but his voice, low and sharp, was for his brother's ears alone. "You overreach, *Shen Qingchun*. You think you can manage me like one of your beasts. You have no idea what you are unleashing."

The door slid shut behind him, leaving Shen Yuan with the chilling certainty that he had just poked a dragon, and the dragon was now planning to burn down his entire menagerie

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The confrontation did not come in a storm of rage, but in a pocket of unnatural stillness.

Shen Yuan was in a secluded grove on Ling You, tending to his most recent acquisition: a *Sun-Devouring Rose*. Its petals were a black so deep they seemed to swallow the light, and the air around it was perpetually cold. It was a selfish, beautiful thing, and its nectar could, with the right preparation, neutralize the most stubborn spiritual poisons. He was gently pruning a thorn when the silence deepened further.

"You are making a fool of me."

Shen Jiu stood at the edge of the grove, his form a slash of jade green against the vibrant foliage. His voice was not loud, but it was sharp enough to flay skin. "You and your... *pests*. Your paperwork. Your padded pillars. You orchestrate this farce and dare to call it *concern*."

Shen Yuan did not look up, his focus on the delicate snip of his shears. "A fool is someone who sees a spark in a room full of gunpowder and chooses to pour oil on it. I am merely... ventilating the room."

"Do *not* treat me like one of your *slow-witted disciples*!" Shen Jiu's control was fraying, his words a hiss. "He is the gunpowder! Can you not see it in his eyes? The ambition, the resentment? He will destroy everything! This Sect! Everything we've built! And you are handing him the match!"

Finally, Shen Yuan looked at him. His eyes were not angry, but held a terrible, sad certainty that was somehow worse. "No, A-Jiu. It is the one who lights the match who starts the fire." He set the shears down, his gaze unwavering. "I will not let you be the one to burn. And I will not let that boy be consumed by a flame you forced into being."

(The first time he'd seen that particular stubborn, terrified fury in his didi's eyes, they were outside a lavish bedroom in the Qiu estate.

Qiu Jianluo had just shoved a trembling, twelve-year-old Shen Jiu inside, a leering *reward* for his pretty face, and turned to lock the door from the outside. Shen Yuan, watching from the shadows of the corridor, felt something in his mind snap—not into panic, but into a cold, surgical clarity.

He didn't scream or beg. As Qiu Jianluo turned away, smug and assured, Shen Yuan acted. He slipped forward and, before the lock could fully click, jammed the mechanism with a sliver of hardened wax he always kept for such contingencies. Then, with a strength born of pure desperation, he wedged a heavy hallway cabinet squarely in front of the door. It wouldn't hold forever, but it would hold long enough.

When Qiu Jianluo returned later, red-faced and roaring as he struggled against the barricade, Shen Yuan was already gone, the evidence of his tampering melted away. He found A-Jiu later, curled and shaking in a hidden alcove near the kitchens.

“He can’t hurt you,” Shen Yuan had promised, his voice eerily calm despite his own racing heart. *“I won’t let him."*)

The words hung in the cold air between them, a declaration of war wrapped in a plea.

Shen Jiu stared, his face a mask of pale, betrayed fury. "You choose *him,*" he whispered, the sound raw. "*Over me*. Over *our survival*. You see a *monster* and you *welcome* it."

"I see a *child*," Shen Yuan corrected, his voice soft but unyielding. "And I see my brother, walking a path that leads to a cliff. I am trying to build a bridge for you both. *Trust me.*"

"*Trust you?*" Shen Jiu let out a sharp, broken sound that was nothing like a laugh. "You have made your choice, *gege*. Do not come crying to me when it all turns to ash."

He turned and left, the grove feeling even colder in his absence. The Sun-Devouring Rose seemed to pulse with a faint, satisfied light.

The irony was a physical sickness. How did you protect someone who saw your outstretched hand as a blade? How did you stand your ground when your *very presence* became the *threat*? He was trying to pull his brother back from a precipice, and all Shen Jiu could see was Shen Yuan blocking his path, siding with the abyss.

A hollow, weary laugh escaped him, misting in the frigid air. He had spent a lifetime building walls to keep A-Jiu safe. He had burned down manors and poisoned rivals and woven intricate, invisible nets of protection. He had done it all so his didi could have the luxury of being soft, of being cruel, of being *anything* but a victim.

And now, the safest path he could forge felt like a *betrayal*. To save Shen Jiu from the narrative's guillotine, he had to become the enemy. To stop him from creating the monster that would destroy him, he had to embrace the monster first.

He looked down at his hands, clean and slender, capable of such delicate, precise work. How many poisons had they mixed? How many traps had they set? All for this. All to end up here, watching his heart walk willingly into the path of a calamity, glaring back at him as if *he* were the danger.

The weight of it was crushing. How do you let them walk into danger?

The answer was simple.

You don’t.

You get there first. You become the danger. You become the merchant, the villain, the obstacle. You let them hate you, if that hatred was the only thing that would keep them alive.

He would burn this script to cinders. He would tear down every pillar of this wretched plot. And if the cost was his brother’s love, then it was a price he would pay. He had carried heavier burdens.

Shen Yuan turned from the grove, his resolve hardening into something colder and sharper than any blade. The path ahead was paved with ash, but he would walk it. he had burned it once, he would do so again.

For A-Jiu

Three Weeks Later

The mission to the Wailing Ghost Ravine was, by all accounts, a catastrophic success. The demons were routed, but the cost was written on the two Peak Lords who returned. Liu Qingge was half-carried, a vicious, spiritually corrosive gash across his chest leaking black tendrils of energy. Shen Jiu walked under his own power, but he was pallid and brittle, his spiritual pathways visibly frayed from the effort of containing a corrupted array that had nearly imploded on them both.

Mu Qingfang's diagnosis was swift and grim. "The corrosive energy has intertwined with both their spiritual foundations. Attempting to purify it separately would risk a cascading collapse. They must both enter seclusion in the Lingxi Caves immediately. The cave's natural energy is the only buffer strong enough to contain the backlash while I prepare the antidotes."

The Lingxi Caves. Seclusion.

This was it. *This* was the exact scenario from PIDW. The spiritual instability, the forced proximity, the perfect storm of resentment and clashing energies. In the novel, this was where Shen Qingqiu, unable to control his own volatile Qi and seething with jealousy and paranoia, had allegedly lashed out, causing Liu Qingge to die from a Qi Deviation.

Liu Mingyan's lifelong vendetta. The final, unforgivable crime that cemented Shen Jiu's fate as the scum villain.

A cold, sharp horror, entirely separate from his feral protectiveness, lanced through him.

*No. No, NO, **NO**.*

This couldn't happen. He had orchestrated this! In his single-minded mission to protect Luo Binghe and distract Shen Jiu, he had inadvertently recreated the very conditions for his didi's ultimate damnation.

(He remembered a different kind of confinement. A cramped, dark cart, jolting over rough roads. The stench of fear and filth. A-Jiu, just a swaddled bundle, was tucked against his chest, too weak to even cry. Shen Yuan, only five, had vowed then, with a clarity that surpassed his years, that he would get them out. That he would burn the whole world down if it meant his didi could breathe free air. He had sneaked into that cart.

He would find a way into these caves.)

`[CRITICAL PLOT UPDATE: "THE LINGXI CAVES SECLUSION" HAS BEEN TRIGGERED. DURATION: INDETERMINATE. NARRATIVE PROGRESSION: 70%. WARNING: PROBABILITY OF CANONICAL FATAL OUTCOME FOR LIU QINGGE HAS INCREASED TO 92%.]`

The System's alert was a spike driven into his skull. *Shut up** he screamed internally. His mind raced, a torrent of panic and grim determination. *I don't care if A-Jiu is trying to kill him or not. It doesn't matter. Liu Qingge cannot die. Not here. Not like this.*

Shen Jiu, leaning heavily on Xiu Ya, shot a final, venomous look at his brother before being led away by a frantic Mu Qingfang.

The message was clearer than ever: *You did this. This is your fault.*

Liu Qingge, barely conscious, just muttered a string of curses about "sneaky demons" and "annoying arrays" before he, too, was half-carried towards the caves.

As the crowd dispersed, Shen Yuan stood alone, his horror crystallizing into a new, terrifying resolve. His plan had worked too well, and in doing so, had nearly doomed them all. The path was clear for Luo Binghe, but at the potential cost of the War God's life and his brother's soul.

'Sha Hualing was coming,' he knew; the familiar, cold focus smothering the panic. *'And now, so was this.'*

The *hard way* was no longer just about bureaucratic skirmishes or preparing for an invasion. It was a desperate, two-front war: one against the incoming demons, and a silent, invisible one against the plot itself, happening deep within the sacred caves. He *had* to find a way to fight a battle inside a sealed chamber without even stepping inside.

He turned and began walking towards the Ling You training grounds, his mind already churning with impossible plans. He needed to speak with his disciples. He needed to have a very specific, "lesson" prepared for a certain Qing Jing disciple.

And he needed to find a way to stop a murder from a distance.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone wondering what the heck happened in the Qiu Jianluo scene

Qiu Jianluo locks Shen Jiu in his bedroom and leaves -> Shen Yuan jams the lock and barricades the door -> Qiu Jianluo returns later and can not get in the bedroom -> Shen Yuan retrieves a terrified and disgusted Shen Jiu from a different hiding spot he had already escaped to.

Also I think it may bear saying, Shen Jiu was not entirely dependent on Shen Yuan throughout, Shen Jiu and Shen Yuan have a different way of doing things. NO Shen Jiu is not a terrified lamb. He was cold and calculated and knew exactly who to steal from. He did not take unnecessary risks. Like breaking and entering and stealing from rich families that had more people under their employ than they had bones in ther bodies.

Chapter 6: The Invasion

Chapter Summary

The Invasion, where the invasion itself is the easiest thing to go through.

Chapter Notes

I have no words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The world had narrowed to a single, agonizing point of failure.

Shen Jiu's spiritual veins screamed in protest, a fine network of glass capillaries on the verge of shattering. He was a dam, meticulously constructed, now holding back a tide of spiritual decay that was not his own. On the other side of his straining will, Liu Qingge's golden core wasn't just destabilizing; it was putrefying, a brilliant sun collapsing into a black hole of demonic poison.

Idiot. Reckless, muscle-headed brute. The insults were a desperate mantra, a familiar shield against the cold, creeping terror. *Why did you have to take the full blast? Why did I have to be the one shackled to you in this tomb?*

His plan had been so simple, so elegant. Let the Bai Zhan War God use his body as a blunt instrument to break the array's physical form. He, Shen Jiu, would contain the ensuing spiritual backlash with his own superior, refined control—a control honed by a lifetime of precise cruelty and his brother's unorthodox, force-fed "nutritional supplements." He would emerge unscathed, victorious, having saved the brute despite himself. A perfect check on his ever-growing ledger of debts and superiority.

The poison, however, was clever. It didn't fight his qi; it inverted it, used Liu Qingge's own formidable life force as fuel for its own consumption. It was a spiritual cancer, and Shen Jiu's energy was the host it was now feeding upon.

He felt the precise moment the last of his reserves began to gutter. A tremor started in his hands—the hands that held the fan, the brush, the sword, with unshakeable precision. A death knell. The cold seeped past his final defenses, carrying the taste of grave dirt and a despair so profound it felt like truth.

Yuan-ge…

The name was not a thought, but a fracture in his soul, a silent, final plea sent into the void. *I can't. I can't hold it.*

And then, he felt it.

Not a presence, but a *pattern*. A concept of cool, green stability woven into the very fabric of the cave's energy. It felt like the first, too-sweet sip of that damned Viper-Headed Spider honey tea. It felt like the humid, verdant silence of his brother's private greenhouses. It was a pre-packaged spiritual algorithm, a key hovering just beyond the lock of his own failing power.

Of course.

The realization was a different kind of cold. His brother had been watching. His brother had known he would fail. His brother had planted a solution in the very soil of his prison, a solution that required his capitulation to activate.

For a single, prideful, glorious second, Shen Jiu embraced the welcoming dark. He would rather die than be his brother's puppet in this, the most intimate of failures.

Then, Liu Qingge shuddered, a full-body spasm that was less a movement and more a piece of the universe cracking. A death rattle echoed in the spiritual silence.

Shen Jiu's pride shattered.

With a final, furious, hateful surge of his will, he didn't just accept the key. He *seized* it. He channeled his brother's bizarre, nurturing poison—this **Sun-Devouring Rose** catalyst—and, with the brutal precision that was his birthright, he guided it like a scalpel straight into the necrotic heart of Liu Qingge's core.

The effect was a violence of purity. The demonic energy, faced with this hyper-specialized antithesis, recoiled and disintegrated. Liu Qingge's body arched off the stone floor, a silent scream tearing through him as the corruption was scoured away.

When it was over, Shen Jiu collapsed, his body wracked with tremors that had nothing to do with exhaustion. He was alive. Liu Qingge was alive, breathing in ragged, stable pulls.

He stared into the darkness, hollowed out. This was not a rescue. It was a demonstration. A reminder that no matter how high he climbed, how sharp his edges became, his brother was the one who had cultivated the ground beneath his feet. The victory was his, but the terms of his survival belonged to Shen Yuan.

The command, when it came, was a lifeline thrown into a sea of panic.

"Disciple Luo."

Luo Binghe flinched, whirling around to find Shen-shibo standing behind him. The man was an oasis of calm in the storm, his green robes unstained, his expression one of detached focus.

"This one listens, Shen-shibo!" Luo Binghe stammered, bowing so low he almost overbalanced.

Shen Yuan pressed a smooth, cool geode into his hands. "The Three-Toothed Crag. Northern cliff face. You will know it by the vein of fool's gold like a lightning bolt. Place this in the exact center of the highest tooth. The alignment is critical. Do not touch it once it is placed. Its resonance will stabilize the mountain."

Shen-shibo's eyes held his, and in their depths was a terrifying, absolute intensity. It was the look of a master engineer entrusting a vital component to his apprentice. It was a look that said, *I see you. I am giving you a piece of the world's balance. Do not fail.*

"Do not fail," Shen-shibo said, his voice low and certain. Then he was gone, turning to direct a cloud of shimmering beetles toward a knot of advancing demons.

Now, standing guard over the now-pulsing geode, Luo Binghe felt the weight of that trust like a physical warmth. He had carried out the task with a reverence usually reserved for ancestral rites. And as he stood there, he could *feel* it. A titanic, silent struggle within the mountain itself. Two immense spiritual pressures—one a vast, intelligent, and terrifyingly alive garden (Shen-shibo), the other a sharp, cold, brilliant blade (Shizun)—were not fighting, but weaving together. The garden offered a vine; the blade used it to strangle a looming darkness.

It was a duet of terrifying power and perfect understanding. All the petty cruelties of Qing Jing Peak shriveled into nothingness before it. Shen-shibo's care was not kindness; it was a fundamental force. To be noticed by him, to be trusted with even a fragment of his design, was a sacred honor. A vow solidified in his heart: he would become strong, useful, indispensable. He would make sure Shen-shibo never had a reason to look away.

On the cliff face opposite, Shen Yuan lowered his hand from the final, fading sigil of the resonance array. The **Dreamless Geode** in his palm, now dull and inert, was still warm. He had felt everything.

The frantic, faltering rhythm of his didi's qi. The terrifying, absolute zero of Liu Qingge's inverted deviation. And the moment of acceptance—not grateful, not relieved, but a furious, spiteful *grabbing* of the tool he'd provided. A-Jiu had taken his medicine and used it to perform a spiritual murder on the sickness.

It had been a catastrophic gamble. The catalyst was designed for purification, not for a volatile qi deviation. He had banked everything on the stability of A-Jiu's core and the razor-sharpness of his mind. He hadn't sent a savior; he'd sent a weapon and trusted his brother to know how to wield it.

The hollow relief that flooded him was so profound it felt like a new kind of illness.

[CRITICAL PLOT DEVIATION: LIU QINGGE'S CANONICAL DEMISE AVERTED. +1000 B-POINTS. NARRATIVE COHESION… RECALIBRATING.]

The System's chime was a gnat's buzz in his ear. Points. Narrative. Meaningless abstractions. The only real metrics were the two stable, if wounded, spiritual signatures now emanating from the cave. He had won. And the taste of it was ash.

He turned. The distant sounds of battle from Qiong Ding Peak—the squelch of slimes, the enraged roars of his Rockbadgers, the screams of demons—was a chaotic symphony. One crisis managed. Now for the other.

He had a role to play.

With the spiritual crisis in the caves resolved, Shen Yuan could turn his full, undivided attention to the nuisance on his doorstep. He descended from the cliff path onto the main plaza of Qiong Ding Peak, his arrival as silent and inevitable as moss spreading over stone.

The scene was one of beautiful, logical chaos. A dozen demons were encased up to their necks in translucent amber, their faces frozen in comical outrage. Another group was tangled in thick, rapidly growing vines that had sprouted from between the flagstones, their thrashing only serving to tighten the grip. A particularly large Rockbadger was sitting on a demon commander, casually grooming its paw while the man wheezed beneath it.

Sha Hualing stood in the center of it all, her confidence visibly fraying. Her forces weren't being defeated by swords, but by the very environment.

"Really," Shen Yuan said, his voice cutting through the din without effort. He snapped his fan open, the sound like a judge's gavel. "This is a place of scholarly pursuit, not a barbarian wrestling pit. You are upsetting the local biodiversity."

She spun to face him, her eyes blazing. "You! What kind of cowardly magic is this?"

"It's not magic. It's applied ecology." He gestured with his fan towards a demon struggling against the slime. "The Amber-Trap Slime, for instance. A fascinating creature. It secretes a

polymer that reacts to aggressive spiritual energy. The more you struggle, the harder it sets. A perfect, self-sustaining containment system."

He took a step closer, his gaze sweeping over her. "Your little invasion has single-handedly ruined three months of behavioral data on the Screaming Lotus-Eaters and likely given the resident colony of Harmony-Slimes a collective nervous breakdown. The remediation costs will be astronomical."

Sha Hualing, for the first time, looked less like a conqueror and more like a customer being presented with an unexpectedly large bill. "You… you dare speak to me of costs?"

"Of course," Shen Yuan said mildly. "Destruction has consequences. Even for demons. Now, you will order your remaining forces to retreat. You will personally apologize to the Head Disciple of Ling You Peak for the disruption. And you will leave this mountain before I am forced to release the *Soul-Soothing Lullaby Moths*. Their song induces a permanent state of placid, suggestible catatonia. I find them ethically dubious for general use, but for uninvited guests…" He let the sentence hang, his smile polite and utterly terrifying.

The threat was a lie. The moths produced a harmless, calming hum. But would she risk it?

She stared at this man who talked of ecosystems and data while her army was being pacified by the local wildlife. He wasn't a warrior; he was a natural disaster in scholar's robes. With a snarl of pure frustration, she gave the retreat signal.

As the demons began their disorganized, humiliating withdrawal, Shen Yuan turned to his head disciple, Fu Xin, who was staring with wide-eyed terror and awe.

"Compile a full report," Shen Yuan instructed. "I want digestion rates for the slimes, stress-level analysis for the Rockbadgers, and a full inventory of any displaced or distressed flora. Have it on my desk by dawn."

The absurdity of the order, delivered amidst the wreckage of a repelled invasion, was the final, perfect note of dark humor. But for Shen Yuan, the humor was a shield. Beneath it, he was already calculating the next, more difficult confrontation.

The air on Qiong Ding Peak was thick with the scent of ozone, crushed herbs, and victory. Shen Yuan stood, fan in hand, listening to Fu Xin's report on slime metabolic rates with an air of polite interest. The repaired Rainbow Bridge flared, depositing the stranded Peak Lords into this scene of bizarre triumph.

The relief on their faces curdled into tension as Shen Jiu emerged from the path to the caves. His face was a pale, cold mask of fury. Behind him, Mu Qingfang supported a wan, but very much alive, Liu Qingge.

Shen Jiu's gaze, sharp enough to flay skin from bone, locked onto his brother. He began to walk forward, each step a deliberate, silent accusation.

"You," Shen Jiu's voice was a whip-crack in the sudden quiet. "Your little theater was a resounding success. The grand architect, victorious without a hair out of place."

Shen Yuan's fan stilled. "The mountain is secure. The disciples are safe. You are alive. That is the only outcome that matters."

"*Alive?*" Shen Jiu spat the word. "Is that what you call this? To be an instrument you pre-tuned? A flawed mechanism you had to remotely *calibrate*?"

From the crowd's edge, Luo Binghe watched, breath caught in his throat. He had seen Shizun's anger, but this was different. This was a raw, bleeding thing.

"Calibrated?" Liu Qingge muttered, confused. "He purged the poison."

"It was not a purge," Mu Qingfang whispered, his healer's senses seeing the truth. "It was a targeted antidote. For Shen-shidi to have used it... he had to accept it, to guide it. The precision required... it is the deepest form of spiritual intimacy, and the deepest violation."

Shen Jiu took another step, his voice dropping to a venomous whisper meant for his brother alone. "You knew the array would backlash. You knew his core was a liability. You sent us in, and you had your cure waiting in the wings. You engineered my failure just so you could play the deus ex machina."

Shen Yuan's knuckles were white on his fan. "I foresaw a danger. I prepared a countermeasure. Must you always see a conspiracy in my foresight?"

"**IT IS A CONSPIRACY WHEN YOU ARE THE ONE WHO DUG THE TRAP!**" The roar was pure, undiluted fury. "You don't provide a net, you loosen the stones on the cliff! You cultivate the very disasters you so elegantly resolve, all to prove your omniscience! To prove that I am a problem only you can solve!"

"**AND IF I HAD DONE NOTHING?**" The words tore from Shen Yuan, his controlled composure fracturing. The facade of the aloof Peak Lord crumbled, revealing the desperate, terrified older brother beneath. "Would your pride have been a worthy epitaph? If I had stood by and let the rot take you both, would your freedom have been worth the silence of your voice?"

"**MY LIFE IS MINE TO LOSE!**"

"**IT IS NOT!**" Shen Yuan's shout was a raw, broken thing. "It has never been just yours to sacrifice! Not since you were a child clinging to my robes in the rain! Every risk you take, you take with a piece of my soul! Every cliff you charge towards, you drag my heart with you!"

The silence that fell was absolute. It was the silence after a world ended.

Shen Jiu was trembling, his magnificent anger met and overwhelmed by a love so vast it felt like annihilation. "You… you would rather smother me in safety than watch me fly on my own broken wings. You would rather I live as your perfectly kept specimen than die as my own man."

Shen Yuan's voice dropped, hoarse with a pain he could no longer conceal. "I would rather you live. By any means I can devise. Even if you spend every second of that life hating me for it. My love for you is not a gentle thing, A-Jiu. It never has been. It is the last line of defense. It is the wall I built between you and a world that has always, *always* tried to break you."

The confession hung in the air, a truth so devastating it left no room for argument.

Shen Jiu took a staggering step back, as if the words were a physical blow that had found its mark. The fight drained out of him, leaving behind a hollowed-out shell. He looked at his brother, his first and only constant, and saw only the architect of his beautiful, inescapable cage.

He turned. The silence was his only answer.

Shen Yuan did not call after him. He stood, perfectly still, a statue of victory in a field of personal ruin. He had saved his brother's life and, in doing so, had become the villain of his story.

Luo Binghe watched Shen-shibo, the man who commanded monsters and reshaped fate, and for a single, heart-stopping moment, saw not a god, but a man standing utterly alone in the ruins of the only thing that had ever mattered to him.

Alone.

The silence in the wake of his brother's departure was not an absence of sound, but a physical weight, crushing and absolute. The victory was ash in his mouth, the celebratory chaos of the secured peak a distant, mocking hum.

A cold, sickening horror uncoiled in Shen Yuan's gut, a serpent of his own making. This had been a tactical move, a masterstroke of calculated distance. Send the unstoppable force and the immovable object on a simple, brute-force mission. Let Liu Qingge's raw power shatter the demonic array's shell. Let A-Jiu's brilliant, vicious mind—and, crucially, the exceptionally stable core Shen Yuan had spent years secretly fortifying with rare herbs and monster essences—contain the spiritual fallout. It was meant to be a distraction. A nuisance. A way to keep his volatile brother and the burgeoning protagonist plotline safely occupied and away from each other.

It was never, *ever* supposed to be a near-death sentence.

The bitter irony was a poison more corrosive than any Viper-Head's venom. His foresight, his encyclopedic knowledge of this world's mechanics—the very things that made him a god among insects—had been the instruments of his own undoing. He knew which hybridized moss could anchor a soul against spiritual corrosion. He had personally neutralized the venom of the **Shadow-Webbed Lurkers** to create a purgative for specific demonic poisons. For years, he had woven an unshakeable safety net for his brother, thread by meticulous thread, all based on the cold, hard certainties of a book.

He had been so fixated on armoring A-Jiu against the future tragedies he *knew* were coming, he had become the author of a brand new one.

He had provided the exact, perfect key for the lock he himself had forged. He had saved his brother's life using the very tools he'd crafted from a place of desperate, terrified love. And in that single, flawless act of salvation, he had proven A-Jiu's most vicious accusation true: in the world according to Shen Yuan, everyone was a piece on a board only he could see. His love was not a shelter; it was a pre-emptive strike. His care was not compassion; it was a calculation. The look in A-Jiu's eyes as he turned away had not been one of hatred, but of a final, devastating clarity: he saw the strings, and the brother he loved was the one holding them, pulling them tight.

Shen Yuan knew what he had to do.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. This is turning into an emotionally draining shit fest.

Chapter 7: Aftermath

Chapter Summary

The Aftermath

Chapter Notes

Welcome to Shen Yuan's personal brand of logic. It is canonically hell. turns out , ofc, I really am no MXTX. The plot has escaped my grasp. The Shen Brothers are spiralling in an increasingly vareid ways. Hopefully they will be able to pull thenselves together in time.
Also hopefully you will be able to see the parallels between SVSSS and this one, bc I made that one comment abt fate not being denied and ran with it.
also remember canonically Shen Yuan just threw himself in front of danger, even though he knew nothing would haappen to Binghe? (if you can not be strong, I will be there to protect you?) This is exactly that. But with Shen Jiu.
Also it is my birthday on 10th so I really really wanted to write stuff. Not to mention I have a mid sem exam on 11th... which i need to go and stdy for.. which I will get to.
And I am surely not procrastinating by writing and promising myself just one more chapter.
haha
Anyway, abt the plot.
Hopefully the interpersonal relations between them all becomes more clear. And also this was supposed to be light hearted and Shen Yuan just having a bad day and why ppl are afraid of him on his bad days, not whatever this is turning out to be. I was not supposed to write so much.

Both Shen Yuan and I can have a scheduled mental breakdown over it later. No onwards towards the story

P.S. Were you able to see the obliviousness of Shen Yuan yet? You will now. Everybody is very very concerned abt him, he is alas in his survival mode now (the calmness in front of great tragedy thing) A crashout will be valid in his case. To bad he isn't allowing himself one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The silence in the wake of his brother's departure was not an absence of sound, but a physical weight, crushing and absolute. Shen Yuan stood perfectly still, a statue of victory in a field of personal ruin. The celebratory chaos of the secured peak was a distant, mocking hum.

Into this vacuum, the System spoke with a new, chilling clarity.

[CRITICAL NARRATIVE DEVIATION ACKNOWLEDGED. PROTOCOL: 'GARDENER' INITIATED.]
[IMMEDIATE ACTION REQUIRED: THE 'SHEN JIU' BRANCH EXHIBITS EXCESSIVE AUTONOMY. HOSTILITY TOWARDS THE GARDENER IS UNSUSTAINABLE.]

[SOLUTION A: ADMINISTER 'OBLIVIATE' SEED. RESET SHEN JIU'S AFFECTIVE MEMORY...]
[SOLUTION B: IMPLEMENT 'BONDED GROWTH' PROTOCOL. FORCE A SPIRITUAL RECONCILIATION...]
[SOLUTION C: ALLOW NATURAL CONSEQUENCES. NARRATIVE STABILITY: 45% AND DECLINING.]

The screen offered him tools to erase his brother's anger or chain their souls together. The victory was ash, and now the System was offering him different flavors of poison to wash it down.

A sharp, hot pain lanced through his spiritual core, so sudden and vicious he stumbled. It was the poison. The exact, virulent demonic corruption he had siphoned away from his brother. He had to get away. Now.

Shen Yuan barely made it to a secluded corridor before his legs buckled. He leaned heavily against the wall, a fine trickle of blood from his nose. The energy radiating from him was fractured.

He had felt it all. The frantic, faltering rhythm of his didi's qi. The moment of furious, spiteful acceptance. And then—the backlash. The spiritual violence that should have shredded A-Jiu's brittle meridians for daring to channel such power.

(A memory surfaced, unbidden: A-Jiu, small and feverish in a stinking alley, shivering against him. His own body was already familiar with the dull ache of sickness...

The world was a blur of heat and cold. A-Jiu trembled, his small frame wracked with shivers. "Ge... it's cold."

"I know," Shen Yuan whispered, pulling him closer. His own lungs ached with the damp, but the fever burning against his chest was a more immediate problem.

A-Jiu fought sickness like a trapped animal, thrashing and wasting what little strength he had. Shen Yuan, who had spent a previous life in a sterile bed, knew how to be still. Knew how to endure.

He focused, the way he would later learn to focus his qi. He imagined the fever as a visible thing, a red, angry haze clinging to his didi. He pictured drawing it into himself, into the familiar landscape of his own perpetual weakness. His body was already a vessel for sickness; what was one more?

He pulled the chill and the fever into himself. It was just… practical.)

He had always been the more logical choice to bear such things. This was just the same principle, on a larger scale.

The memory was a fresh wound as Mu Qingfang arrived, his diagnostic qi flaring with alarm.

"Shen-shixiong!"

"You..." Mu Qingfang breathed, the truth dawning as he supported him. "The conduit... You didn't just guide the cure. You drew the backlash into yourself. Shen Jiu never felt it."

Shen Yuan closed his eyes, a pained shake of his head his only confirmation. It wasn't a sacrifice; it was a simple matter of resource allocation. His body was the designated receptacle for this kind of damage. A-Jiu’s wasn’t.

Containing the backlash was like trying to cage lightning. The demonic poison, having been processed through Shen Yuan's unique core, had mutated. It wasn't just corrosive; it was *adaptive*, resisting standard purgatives and weaving itself into his spiritual pathways.

"It's rooted itself," Mu Qingfang said, his face grim hours later, sweat beading on his brow. "I can contain the spread, but I cannot purge it. Not with any method I know. It's... it's a part of him now. A chronic condition."

(There existed a world when the poison was another. Taken in while saving a loved one.

This was not that world.

And yet,

Fate would not be denied.)

"The information goes no further. The disciples will be told you are recovering from core exhaustion."

The door to the ward slid open. Yue Qingyuan stood there, his face a carefully composed mask of sect leadership that did not hide the devastation in his eyes. Mu Qingfang glanced between the two men, bowed slightly, and withdrew, leaving them in heavy silence.

Yue Qingyuan approached the bed where Shen Yuan lay, pale and gaunt.

"The 'botched talisman' that scarred your meridians when you were thirteen," Yue Qi's voice was soft, cracking on the edges. "The night in the alley when you were eight, and I found you half-frozen, clutching a brother who was warm for the first time in days. You have always been the one to take the blow for him."

Shen Yuan turned his head away, staring at the wall. "It was the logical thing to do. My constitution could handle it. His couldn't. It’s not complicated, Qi-ge."

"And now... this." Yue Qingyuan gestured at his prone form, his voice thick. "You call it logic. He will call it manipulation. He believes the world is full of people who want to break him. He does not see that his own brother has spent a lifetime using his own body as a shield because he deemed it 'the logical thing to do'. Your methods, A-Yuan... this secrecy... it doesn't protect him. It only ensures he will never understand the cost of his own survival.""

The use of the childhood name, the raw pain in Yue Qingyuan's voice, seemed to baffle Shen Yuan more than the poison.

“What would you have me do, Qi-ge?” The childhood name was a soft exhale of exhaustion. “Stand aside and let him be harmed when I can intervene? Should I tally the wounds and present them to him? ‘Look, didi, see what I have endured for you. Your gratitude is now required.’ That isn’t protection. It is merely another chain.”

Yue Qingyuan had no answer. He, who had failed to protect his Xiao Jiu time and again, could offer no better path. He could only bear silent witness to the devastating arithmetic of Shen Yuan’s devotion—a love that treated its own suffering not as a sacrifice, but as the most simple and practical of tools.

The news that filtered out was carefully controlled: Shen Qingchun was in seclusion, recovering from the immense spiritual exertion of repelling the invasion and coordinating his beasts. Liu Qingge, once stabilized and hearing this sanctioned version, marched into the healing ward. He stood at the foot of the bed, his usual bluster replaced by a stiff, solemn respect.

"You saved my life," the War God stated, as if accusing him of a crime. "The mission was a success because of your planning. My life-debt is to you, Shen Qingchun. Bai Zhan Peak will

remember." It was a loyalty earned not through clever words, but through undeniable, near-fatal action.

In the deepening twilight, a solitary figure moved through the Qing Jing Peak dormitories. The imbalance was clear. The one who gave everything received only bitterness, while the one who spat venom was obeyed without question. This would not stand. A correction was needed, one that would not be traced back to the Ling You greenhouse, but would ensure its master's efforts were never again so carelessly squandered.

The silence between the Shen brothers stretched, a chasm built of a lifetime of one brother's practical solutions and the other's perceived betrayals. But around that silence, new alliances formed and a quiet, determined force began to move in the shadows.

The mountain of scrolls on Shen Yuan's desk had achieved a state of critical mass, threatening to collapse and bury the single cup of tea that was his last defense against the bureaucratic abyss.

"Explain this," he said, his voice flat, holding up a missive on lavender-scented parchment. "In triplicate."

Shang Qinghua, who had been designated 'Logistical Liaison' by a gleeful Yue Qingyuan, peered at the scroll. "Ah. That's from the Zui Xian Peak Lord. He claims the 'discordant spiritual frequencies' of the battle caused his premier vintage to 'develop a hostile bouquet' and is demanding compensation for… let's see… 'one hundred barrels of spiritually-soothing, peak-grade plum wine'."

Shen Yuan dropped the scroll as if it were contaminated. "The only thing hostile is his understanding of basic viticulture. Yeast does not develop emotional trauma. Reply: 'The terroir was clearly subpar. Suggest recalibrating your fermentation wards instead of blaming external factors. Request denied.' Next."

This was their new normal. Shen Yuan, ostensibly recovering from 'severe core exhaustion,' was buried in the aftermath of his victory. Shang Qinghua was his unwilling scribe, a captive audience to the most absurd administrative fallout in Cang Qiong's history.

"Next is the formal complaint from the Artificer Peak," Shang Qinghua said, unrolling another scroll. "They've itemized the 'unauthorized structural modifications.' They're charging you for the 'aesthetic realignment' of three pavilions and the 'unlicensed spiritual re-gilding' of a statue of the founding sect leader."

"The statue was about to be pulverized by a Blood-Scented Bouldermaw. The 're-gilding' is demonic viscera. Tell them to send a cleaning crew, not an invoice."

“Can I write ‘stop whining and be grateful you’re not a red stain’?” Shang Qinghua muttered, his brush poised.

“Phrase it with more bureaucratic venom. You’re the master.”

Their back-and-forth was a familiar dance, but today the rhythm was off. Shen Yuan’s retorts lacked their usual surgical precision. He’d pause, his gaze drifting towards the window that faced Qing Jing Peak, and when he reached for his tea, the cup made a faint, uneven clatter against the saucer as he lifted it. He set it down with deliberate care.

The door to the study, reinforced after a previous incident with an over-enthusiastic badger, exploded inwards.

Shen Yuan didn’t even flinch. He just took a long, slow sip of his tea, his grip visibly tightening to keep the motion steady. “Liu-shidi. The door was a barrier. It served a purpose.”

Liu Qingge stood in the wreckage, radiating earnest, destructive intent. “You are convalescing. Your peak is vulnerable. I am here to help.”

Shang Qinghua made a small, pathetic sound and tried to hide behind the mountain of scrolls.

“Your help,” Shen Yuan said, his tone dangerously pleasant, “is currently costing me a new door. And my peace of mind.”

“Nonsense. Your defenses are lacking. I will begin with the perimeter.” Liu Qingge’s idea of ‘fortifying the perimeter’ seemed to involve personally challenging every semi-sentinent plant to a duel.

An hour later, the true cost of Liu Qingge’s assistance became clear.

“Shizun! Shizun!” Fu Xin ran into the study, pale and panting. “The War God… he’s… he’s pacified the Screaming Lotus-Eaters!”

Shen Yuan closed his eyes. “Define ‘pacified’.”

“He shouted at them until they… stopped screaming. Permanently. They’ve gone dormant! And… and he decided the Qi-Sensitive Moss-Hoppers needed ‘combat conditioning.’ They’re having a collective panic attack in the western grove! The Harmony Slimes have turned a violent, pulsating grey!”

Shen Yuan rose. The movement was fluid, but his hand braced against the desk for a moment longer than necessary before pushing off. He walked to the scene, his pace measured, as if each step required conscious calculation.

He found Liu Qingge standing triumphantly over a patch of now-silent, tightly closed lotus buds. The Moss-Hoppers were a quivering, terrified carpet in the distance.

“Liu-shidi,” Shen Yuan said, his voice soft as silk over a blade. “The Screaming Lotus-Eaters’ vocalizations are a critical part of their pollination cycle. You haven’t pacified them. You have induced a spiritual coma.” He gestured to the grove, his sleeve fluttering with the motion, but his fingers, when he lowered his arm, curled inward briefly, as if to still themselves. “And the Moss-Hoppers are bio-indicators. Their ‘bounce coefficient,’ which you have just reduced to zero, is how I monitor the peak’s spiritual health. You haven’t trained them. You have traumatized them.”

Liu Qingge crossed his arms, scowling. “They were weak. I was strengthening them.”

“You are dismantling my peak’s ecosystem one brute-force intervention at a time.” The words were sharp, but the delivery was weary. The fire was banked, the energy behind it depleted. “The best way you can help, Liu-shidi, is to return to Bai Zhan and… meditate. Deeply. On the meaning of the word ‘subtlety’.”

For a moment, it seemed Liu Qingge would argue. Then he looked at Shen Yuan—truly looked—at the pallor beneath his composed facade, the faint shadows under his eyes. The War God gave a curt, frustrated nod and stalked off, leaving a trail of minor destruction in his wake.

Liu Qingge did not return to Bai Zhan. Instead, he found himself on the remote, windswept cliffs of Wan Jian Peak, the forge-fires below mirroring the frustrated burn in his chest. He had gone to help, to repay his life-debt, and had only succeeded in breaking things. *Again.*

The memory rose, unbidden and sharp: his first week as Bai Zhan’s Peak Lord, a trial by combat that had gone too far. A senior disciple, arrogant and overconfident, had refused to yield. Liu Qingge, young and brimming with unchecked power, had shattered the disciple’s core instead of simply disarming him. The shame had been a cold stone in his gut. He had gone to Ling You then, too, drawn by a reputation for healing rare spiritual injuries.

He’d found Shen Qingchun not in a ward, but in a sun-drenched clearing, his hands covered in soil as he gently repotted a shimmering, crystalline orchid. Liu Qingge had expected pity or cautious reprimand.

Instead, Shen Qingchun had listened, then said without looking up, “The problem with a hammer, Liu-shidi, is that it only knows how to be a hammer. It cannot learn to be a needle. But it can learn *where* to strike.” He’d finally met Liu Qingge’s gaze, his own calm and assessing. “Your strength isn’t the issue. Your precision is. You break things because you have not yet learned to see the cracks *before* they spread.”

It was the first time anyone had treated his greatest flaw not as a moral failing, but as a technical problem to be solved. It was… useful.

Now, staring at the chasm below, Liu Qingge understood the lesson he'd missed. Shen Qingchun saw the cracks in *everything*. And now, the one who could always see the fractures was himself breaking. And Liu Qingge, for all his world-shattering power, had no idea how to be a needle. The realization was a defeat far worse than any lost battle.

Shen Yuan let out a long, slow breath. He lifted a hand to summon a wisp of spiritual energy to soothe the terrified Moss-Hoppers, a simple task he'd performed ten thousand times. His fingers formed the seal, but the gesture was stiff. The green light flickered at his fingertips, unstable, weaving like a dying firefly before sputtering out entirely.

He stared at his empty hand, the fingers slowly uncurling. He did not try again.

"Fu Xin," he said, his voice perfectly level. "See to the grove. Use the Calming Hymn I taught you."

"Yes, Shizun!"

As his head disciple rushed off, Shen Yuan turned and walked back to his study. He didn't look at the dormant lotuses or the shattered door. He walked past Shang Qinghua, who was watching him with an unreadable expression, and sat behind his desk. He picked up his teacup with both hands, the porcelain cradled between his palms as he brought it to his lips.

"Where were we?" he asked, his gaze fixed on a point somewhere beyond the scrolls.

Shang Qinghua swallowed. "The, uh, the Artificer Peak invoice."

"Right." Shen Yuan's smile was a thin, brittle thing. "Bureaucratic venom. Let's hear it."

The laughter was gone. The chaos was contained. But in the quiet of the study, a different, more profound chaos was quietly, relentlessly, taking root.

The dream was always the same.

A great, black maw yawning open beneath a splintered sky. The scent of blood and ozone. And a single, glowing red eye watching from the depths with a terrible, ancient patience.

Shen Yuan woke not with a gasp, but with a slow, cold dread, his spiritual core throbbing with a dissonant hum. The System log, a ghostly afterimage in his vision, stated simply:

[NIGHTMARE CYCLE CONFIRMED. NARRATIVE ASSIMILATION: 12%]

He sat up, the movement careful, deliberate. The morning light felt abrasive. On his desk, amidst the ever-present scrolls, lay a new missive. The paper was thick, watermarked with lotuses, and scented with a cloying, expensive perfume. Huan Hua Palace.

His hand, as he reached for it, was steady. He had trained it to be. But the effort was a low, constant drain, like holding a heavy weight perfectly still.

The letter was a masterpiece of veiled predation. The Old Palace Master expressed his "profound admiration" for Cang Qiong's "innovative" defense, specifically naming Shen Qingchun's "unconventional mastery over the natural world." It was an invitation, couched in flattery, for a "cultural exchange" to "foster harmony" before the upcoming Immortal Alliance Conference.

A vulture circling, Shen Yuan thought, his mind feeling frayed at the edges. He could almost feel the old man's gaze, sensing a new, interesting variable in his calculations. The thought of navigating that den of snakes, of maintaining his facade under such scrutiny, was a profound and soul-deep exhaustion.

But beneath the exhaustion, a different set of variables began to align in his mind, cool and detached, like arranging specimens in a display case.

Huan Hua Palace. Wealthy. Politically powerful. Militarily robust. A known quantity in the narrative.

His memory, though sometimes fraying, supplied the key data points with grim clarity. The Water Prison. Its legendary, near-impenetrable seals. It had held a Heavenly Demon since the last War. Its defensive capabilities were, by any objective metric, superior to anything Cang Qiong could offer currently, especially since it had already once been breached. Huan Hua was the Master in Arrays. A fortress within a fortress.

The Old Palace Master was a problem, of course. Ambitious. Devious. A man who saw people as tools. But that very nature made him predictable. Ambitious men could be managed, their desires channeled. A tool, after all, could be wielded by either side. And a man who saw others as pawns was often blind to the strings being tied around his own wrists.

The plan formed not as a grand ambition, but as a simple, logical conclusion. Cang Qiong was a shield he was no longer certain he could hold. But Huan Hua… Huan Hua was a cage. A perfectly engineered, gilded, and politically unassailable cage. One could protect something infinitely precious by placing it inside the world's most secure vault. The morality of the vault's keeper was a secondary concern to the integrity of its locks.

It was the most efficient solution. A final, failsafe option he would never speak aloud. If the unspeakable truly came to pass, if Luo Binghe could not be stopped, then Huan Hua would have to do. It was now neatly catalogued in the back of his mind, ready for use.

The plan was a cold, hard seed in his mind, but it required cultivation. Shen Yuan found himself observing the Huan Hua delegation with a new, clinical focus when they visited Qiong Ding for preliminary Conference discussions. He noted the Old Palace Master's avuncular smile that didn't reach his eyes, the way his disciples moved with a synchronized, almost militaristic precision. He catalogued it all: strengths, weaknesses, potential leverage points.

It was during one of these interminable meetings that the thread finally snapped.

Yue Qingyuan was speaking, his voice a calm, diplomatic drone. Shen Yuan was meant to be providing supporting data on the projected migration patterns of spiritual beasts near the proposed Conference grounds. It was his area of expertise. He had the scroll in front of him. He knew the information.

But when Yue Qingyuan turned to him with a gentle, expectant look, the words evaporated.

A blank, white silence filled his head. The intricate maps, the carefully noted cycles, the behavioral patterns of a dozen different species—it was all just… gone. He could feel the expectant eyes of the other Peak Lords, the politely masked curiosity of the Huan Hua delegates. He saw the faintest flicker of concern in Mu Qingfang’s gaze.

His fan was in his hand. He opened it with a soft *snap*, the sound startling in the quiet. The movement was a shield.

"The data is… currently being cross-referenced with the latest lunar charts for optimal accuracy," he heard himself say, his voice perfectly even, a masterpiece of polished evasion. "I will have the finalized report delivered by tomorrow."

It was a lie. A flimsy, bureaucratic lie. The kind he would have once eviscerated someone else for using.

Yue Qingyuan, bless his endlessly trusting heart, simply nodded and moved on. But Shen Yuan sat through the rest of the meeting frozen, the cold dread from his nightmare now a living thing in his veins. His mind, his greatest weapon, was failing. The shield was not just cracked; it was forgetting its own shape.

On Qing Jing Peak, the air was thick with the scent of ink and repressed tension. A senior disciple, reciting a classic poem, fumbled a single character.

Shen Jiu’s fan, identical to his brother’s, snapped shut.

The resulting silence was a physical blow. The disciple flinched.

“Incompetent,” Shen Jiu’s voice was a whip-crack, lashing across the courtyard. “Do you take these halls for a peasant’s tavern? Your mind is as muddled as your pronunciation.”

The punishment was swift, brutal, and public. A hundred copies of the foundational texts. The boy’s face, pale with humiliation, was a mirror of the collective fear that gripped the other disciples.

Later, in the seclusion of his bamboo house, Shen Jiu picked up his own teacup. The porcelain was fine, translucent. His hand, usually so steady, betrayed a faint, almost imperceptible vibration, sending tiny ripples across the surface of the tea. He stared at the disturbed liquid, his own reflection warping in the miniature waves. He set the cup down with a sharp, definitive click, the sound echoing in the silent room. The surface of the tea continued to tremble long after his hand had withdrawn.

The silence in Shen Yuan’s study was broken only by the frantic scratching of Shang Qinghua’s brush. The An Ding Peak Lord was attempting to draft a reply to the Huan Hua Palace’s invitation.

Shen Yuan stood before a large map, his back to Shang Qinghua. His posture was straight, but his focus was too still.

“Just tell them you’re busy cultivating a new strain of venomous caterpillars or something,” Shang Qinghua muttered, blotting ink.

Shen Yuan didn’t turn. His finger tapped a specific, remote location on the map—a jagged fissure in the borderlands marked *‘Jue Di Gorge’*. “The Glacial-Winged Swallows. Their migration path is being disrupted. A nest of **Shadow-Wasp Drakes** moved into the northern crags last season.”

Shang Qinghua’s brush froze. He looked from the map to Shen Yuan’s rigid back. “You… you didn’t forget the data at the meeting.”

“The finalized report will be delivered tomorrow,” Shen Yuan said, his voice devoid of inflection. “It will note the drake infestation. You will mention to the Qiong Ding disciples that Ling You will handle it.” He finally turned. The blankness from the meeting was gone, replaced by a hyper-clarity that made Shang Qinghua’s stomach clench. “Personally.”

The unspoken words hung in the air. Shen Yuan wasn't just fixing a mistake. He was creating a stage. He was going to a remote, dangerous location alone, ensuring Huan Hua would hear of it. He was making himself a tantalizing, isolated prize.

“You’re painting a target on your back,” Shang Qinghua whispered, aghast.

Shen Yuan's gaze was distant, already looking through him. "A target is a fixed point. It is easier to control what is focused on you."

Shang Qinghua fled Ling You Peak, the image of Shen Yuan's hollow, hyper-focused gaze burned behind his eyes. He locked the door of his An Ding office and poured a generous cup of wine with a trembling hand.

He knows, a panicked voice chattered in his mind. *He has to know. The System, the narrative, the fucking 'Gardener' protocol… he's connecting it all. And he's building a fucking bunker.* He drained the cup and poured another, the alcohol doing nothing to quiet the memory that surfaced, thick with the dust of his own fear.

It was years ago, not long after they'd both become Peak Lords. He'd found Shen Yuan in the library, pale and seething over a scroll detailing the massacre of a minor sect by a rampaging demon beast—a plot point Shang Qinghua had written to explain a future treasure's location. "This is sloppy," Shen Yuan had hissed, jabbing a finger at the text. "The beast's behavior makes no ecological sense. It kills for a MacGuffin it doesn't need? It's contrived. It's *stupid*."
Shang Qinghua, sweating, had mumbled about "poetic license" and "narrative necessity." Shen Yuan had fixed him with a look of pure, unadulterated contempt. "Necessity? This isn't a story, Shang-shidi. This is life. When you build a world on a foundation of idiocy, the whole structure is unstable. It creates… plotholes. And things fall through."

Now, things were falling through. The protagonist was skulking, the villain was self-destructing, and the world's most brilliant patch and his best friend was actively planning for the total collapse of the narrative. Shen Yuan was trying to fix the foundational idiocy of *Proud Immortal Demon Way* with the only tools he had: logic, sacrifice, and a terrifying willingness to use himself as bait and bargaining chip.

The news travelled, as it always did. *Shen Qingchun, personally overseeing the clearance of a minor drake nest in the Jue Di Gorge.*

On Qing Jing Peak, Shen Jiu heard the report and went very still. The Jue Di Gorge was not a place for a Peak Lord to handle a minor infestation. It was unstable, rife with wild energy, and a known smuggling route for unsavory elements. It was the kind of place where accidents happened. Where a man could vanish.

His first, furious thought was that his brother was staging some elaborate, self-sacrificial ploy for attention. But the memory of that blank, lost look in the meeting hall rose, unbidden. This

felt different. This felt like a deliberate, almost reckless, provocation.

His brooding was interrupted by a commotion. Ming Fan was dragging a sheepish-looking Luo Binghe by the collar.

“Shizun! This beast was caught stealing from the library! Advanced texts on core destabilization!”

Shen Jiu’s fan snapped up. “And what use would a little beast like you have for such knowledge?” The question was a lash, but his eyes were analyzing, searching for a motive beyond simple ambition.

Luo Binghe kowtowed, forehead touching the floor. “This disciple was merely curious about theoretical principles,” he stammered.

Shen Jiu stared at the bowed head. He saw the boy’s hands, clenched just enough to whiten the knuckles. Not with fear. With frustration.

“One hundred laps. Then, copy the ‘Virtues of Humility’ fifty times,” Shen Jiu hissed, his voice tight. “Get out.”

As Luo Binghe scrambled away, Shen Jiu remained standing. His brother was walking into a obvious trap.

A memory, sharp and unbidden: Himself at twelve, arm bruised from a slaver's grip. Shen Yuan, pale and determined, stepping forward.

"Take me instead," his brother had said to the slaver, his voice too calm for the filth of that alley. "He's too difficult. He'll fight you every step. I'm quieter. I'm smarter. I can read and write. I'm the better investment."

The slaver had backhanded him. Shen Yuan had just taken it, staggering but not falling, his eyes never leaving the man's face. "See?" he'd said, wiping blood from his lip. "I don't fight back. He will. Until one of you is dead."

It had been a bluff, a desperate play of calculated logic. And it had worked. The slaver, seeing the feral defiance in Shen Jiu's own eyes, had grunted and dragged Shen Yuan away.

He'd gotten them both out two days later, with a clever lie and a stolen key. But the image was burned into Shen Jiu's soul: his brother, offering himself as the logical, more manageable sacrifice.

Ning Yingying found Luo Binghe later, sitting by the bamboo grove, his shoulders slumped not in fatigue, but in a deep, frustrated sadness.

"A-Luo," she said softly, sitting beside him. "Shizun… he's just worried about Shen-shibo."

Luo Binghe looked up, his dark eyes wide. "Worried?"

"Mm!" Ning Yingying nodded, hugging her knees. "I saw him this morning. He was looking towards Ling You Peak, and his hand was shaking so much he spilled his tea all over his favorite scroll! He didn't even get mad. He just… looked tired." She leaned in conspiratorially. "I think when people are really, really scared, they get angry instead. It's like… a big, prickly shield."

She didn't understand the complex politics or the bitter history. She only saw what was in front of her: a Shizun who was more afraid than angry, and a kind Shen-shibo who was suddenly forgetting things and going to dangerous places alone.

"Shen-shibo gave me a seed once," she continued, her voice dreamy. "He said if I nurtured it with happy thoughts, it would grow into a flower that sang. I tried so hard, and it bloomed. It sang so beautifully, but…" Her smile faltered. "It was after a mission, I think. I was too sad to give it any happy thoughts, and it just… withered. It sang and sang until its petals fell." She looked at Luo Binghe, her eyes wide and serious. "I think… I think maybe Shen-shibo is like that seed. He does so much to make everyone else's world beautiful, but nobody's giving him any happy thoughts to grow with. He's just… singing until he withers."

Luo Binghe was silent, Ning Yingying's childish wisdom striking a profound and terrible chord. He had been seeking knowledge on core destabilization out of a vague, self-protective instinct. In case his demonic and human qi ever backfired on him. If the world, and his own Shizun, was too broken to protect the one person who had ever shown him unconditional kindness, besides his mother, then he would have to become strong enough to do it himself. He would become the unbreakable soil, the unwavering sun. He would become the strength that Shen-shibo so carelessly spent on everyone but himself.

Yue Qingyuan watched the threads of his family unravel in silence, and his heart, already a patchwork of old regrets, began to tear along its seams.

His first stop was Ling You Peak. He found Shen Yuan not in his study, but in a secluded greenhouse, meticulously examining a captured **Shadow-Wasp Drake** with an intensity that bordered on feverish. The air hummed with the insect's agitated buzzing.

"A-Yuan," Yue Qingyuan began, his voice soft as he stepped inside.

Shen Yuan didn't look up. His finger, sheathed in a protective spiritual barrier, traced the line of the drake's venom sac. "Their neurotoxin is a fascinating compound, Qi-ge. It doesn't

destroy neural pathways; it temporarily severs them. Creates a blank slate. A reset."

The clinical detachment in his brother's tone was more frightening than any outburst. Yue Qingyuan moved closer. "The mission to the gorge… is it truly necessary? This seems… specialized for a simple clearance."

"Efficiency requires understanding the tools at hand," Shen Yuan replied, his gaze still locked on the insect. "The report was delayed. Personal oversight is the logical correction."

Yue Qingyuan's hand twitched, wanting to rest on Shen Yuan's shoulder, to feel the tension coiled there. He didn't. "A-Yuan… if you are shouldering a burden… this Qi-ge's back is still strong enough. You do not have to face everything alone."

For a single, heart-stopping moment, Shen Yuan's hands stilled. The professional mask seemed to waver, and Yue Qingyuan saw the exhausted, terrified man beneath.

(He was seven years old, hiding with A-Jiu in a rain-barrel, the stench of garbage thick around them. "Don't make a sound," he whispered, feeling his didi's small, tense body pressed against him. He could feel A-Jiu's fear, a live wire threatening to spark. So he did what he always did. He made his own breathing slow and even. He forced his own heartbeat to calm. He became a shield not of flesh, but of presence, projecting a stillness he didn't feel, so A-Jiu would have something stable to cling to. The logic was simple: if he was calm, A-Jiu could be safe.)

Then, it was gone. "The burden is mine to manage," he said, his voice flat once more. "But thank you, Qi-ge."

It was a dismissal. A polite, final wall. Yue Qingyuan left the greenhouse feeling colder than when he entered.

He went to Qing Jing Peak next, the air there sharp with the scent of ink and repressed fury. He found Shen Jiu in his bamboo house, a scroll on inter-peak resource allocation laid out before him, but his eyes were distant, seeing nothing.

"Xiao Jiu," Yue Qingyuan said, the name a gentle offering.

Shen Jiu's head snapped up, his eyes blazing. "Do not call me that." The venom was automatic, but the fire behind it was low, banked by a deep, unsettling preoccupation.

"I am concerned about your brother," Yue Qingyuan pressed on, undeterred. "This mission he is undertaking…"

“What concern is it of mine what the great Shen Qingchun does?” Shen Jiu cut him off, his fan snapping open with a sharp crack. “He makes his calculations. He plays his games. Let him.”

But Yue Qingyuan saw it. The way Shen Jiu’s knuckles were white on his fan. The way he had not immediately launched into a tirade about his brother’s manipulations. He was worried. Terrified. And refusing to admit it.

“He is not… himself,” Yue Qingyuan said, choosing his words with the care of a man crossing a frozen lake. “The meeting… and now this solitary mission. It feels… reckless.”

A muscle in Shen Jiu’s jaw twitched. “Since when has he ever been reckless? Every move is planned. Every outcome calculated.” He looked away, out the window towards the distant, serene outline of Ling You. “This is just a new variable in his grand design. One he has not bothered to explain.”

The pain in those words was a living thing. Yue Qingyuan recognized the plea hidden within the bitterness: *Why won’t he explain? Why won’t he let me in?*

“Perhaps… if you spoke to him…” Yue Qingyuan ventured, his own desperation bleeding through.

Shen Jiu let out a short, harsh laugh. “And say what? We have nothing to say to each other.” He turned his back, a definitive end to the conversation. “Leave, Sect Leader. You have a sect to run. Do not waste your time on a broken bridge.”

Defeated, Yue Qingyuan left. He had tried to be the thread that mended the tear, but both brothers had cut him, one with cold politeness, the other with hot dismissal. The silence between them was a chasm, and he was powerless to build a bridge across it.

The silence in the wake of Yue Qingyuan's departure was different from the one that had followed Shen Jiu. That had been a wall of fury. This was the hollow echo of a failed rescue.

Shen Yuan stood alone in his greenhouse. The *Shadow-Wasp Drake* buzzed, a frantic, trapped thing. He looked from it to the small wooden box Mu Qingfang had left.

Three pills. Three resets.

A temporary clarity he would need for the gorge.

His gaze drifted to the window, towards Qing Jing. The chasm between them was now a tangible thing, mapped in the worried lines on Yue Qingyuan's face and the cold dread in his own spirit. He had built his entire life around a single, practical principle: protect A-Jiu. Now, that very principle was the weapon carving them apart.

He reached out, not for a pill, but for the drake's crystal vial. His fingers closed around it. The buzz against his palm was a violent, living tremor.

It was time to stop being the shield.

It was time to become the trap.

On Qing Jing Peak, Shen Jiu stood at his own window, watching the path Yue Qingyuan had taken. The Sect Leader's desperate, futile visit had only made the silence louder. It had confirmed his worst fear: the adults were no longer in control. The world was tilting, and the only one who might have righted it was throwing himself into the abyss.

His eyes fell on a small, forgotten pot on his windowsill. A hardy, ugly little cactus. A gift, years ago, from a brother who had said, "It thrives on neglect. Like you." He had meant it as an insult. Shen Jiu had kept it out of spite.

He picked up the pot. The ceramic was cool and rough. His hand did not tremble.

He had spent a lifetime seeing his brother's actions as control. What if he had been wrong? What if it had always been this? A desperate, clumsy, infuriating attempt to make sure something—*anything*—of Shen Jiu survived, even if it was just a stubborn, prickly thing in a pot?

The realization did not bring peace. It brought a terrifying, vertiginous clarity. If that was true, then the Jue Di Gorge wasn't a ploy. It was a confession. A final, logical step in a lifetime of catastrophic, self-immolating devotion.

He could not let him go alone.

Chapter End Notes

Shen Yuan had genuinely forgotten during the meeting with Huan Hua Palace. The rest were valid crashing out over one of the sharpest minds in their arsenals just stuttering like that.
Shang QInghua merely assumed it was deliberate and Shen Yuan just went with it.

Also buddies who do paperwork together stay together.

NO Shen Yuan has not forgotten about Luo Binghe, but acc to him, there was no rumour yet from Qing JIng where he was punished that harshly (whipping and all) so everything was fine, and also the guy is very very stressed.

Chapter 8: The Immortal Alliance Conference

Chapter Summary

The Immortal Alliance Conference

Chapter Notes

Thngs have been broken enough for now, after this chapter everything will heal, dw.
and I couldn't let those two never solve their differences.

But... we did create new more fun enemies out of cute disciples... so..
was it worth it?

The note on Shen Yuan's desk was infuriatingly precise, detailing a departure at first light for the Jue Di Gorge. But when Shen Jiu stormed into his brother's rooms in the pre-dawn darkness, he found only cold tea and an impeccably made bed. The air in the room was still, holding its breath.

(The scent of rain on dusty streets. A younger Shen Jiu, trembling with fever, clutched a stolen bun. "He'll find us, Ge. He always finds us."

Shen Yuan, his own small hands chapped and dirty, didn't look up from the complex knot he was tying in a piece of string. "He looks in the usual places first. The alleys behind the tavern, the bridge. He thinks we're stupid. We won't be there." His voice was calm, a rock in the churning river of Shen Jiu's fear. "We'll be where he'd never expect: right under his nose.")

The memory was a cold splash of water. *He left early.* Of course he did. His brother had always been two steps ahead of every threat, every pursuer. He wasn't just avoiding the Gorge's dangers; he was avoiding *him*.

Shen Jiu flew on Xiu Ya, the wind a frantic whip against his face. Below, the Jue Di Gorge unfolded like a festering wound in the earth, all jagged black rock and swirling, malevolent mist. He felt it then—a sickening flare of demonic energy that made his own golden core recoil, followed by the sharp, clean sizzle of a talisman discharge.

When he landed, the fight was over. The scene was one of chilling, unnatural order. A nest of Shadow-Wasp Drakes, moments ago a seething mass of fury, were now grotesque sculptures encased in translucent amber, their final, furious snarls frozen for eternity. The air stank of ozone and the cloying sweetness of crushed Spirit-Lulling Lilies.

And in the center of it all stood Shen Yuan. Not a hair was out of place. His green robes were pristine, untouched by the grime of the gorge. He was calmly wiping a dark, viscous fluid from a glass specimen jar with a spotless white cloth.

He turned. His face was a polite, impenetrable mask. "A-Jiu. You're far from your peak."

The words were a perfectly aimed dart. They punctured Shen Jiu's frantic fear, his desperate flight, and left him standing there, his sword still humming in his hand, feeling like a foolish child who had overreacted to a shadow.

(*A different kind of stillness. The Qiu estate, the night before the fire. Shen Jiu, bruised and furious, had confronted him. "You just sit there and read! He could walk in here any moment!"*
Shen Yuan didn't look up from the complex knot he was tying in a piece of string. His hands were steady. "Let him," he said, his voice low. The candlelight caught the calm certainty in his eyes. "I'm counting on it.")

The same look was in his eyes now. He had not just survived; he had conducted a symphony of calculated violence and walked away without a single note out of place. But the cost was written in the too-bright sheen of his eyes, the faint, almost imperceptible tremor in the hand that held the cloth. He had won, but he had paid for it with a piece of his qi. His Brother. he was not well.

Shen Jiu turned without a word. The path back to his peak felt longer than the one that had brought him here.

The silence on Ling You Peak in the days that followed was a living thing, thin and strained, like a note held at the very edge of breaking. Shen Yuan moved through it like a wisp of smoke. He performed his duties, but his motions were slow, deliberate, as if he were navigating a world that had become suddenly, dangerously sharp. The "reset" pill had done its job, but it had left a hollowed-out resonance in its wake, a spiritual fragility that made the very air feel abrasive.

He was not the only one navigating this new, precarious reality.

As the sun began to bleed into the horizon, painting the sky in melancholic hues, a solid, white-clad figure would appear on the winding paths of Ling You. Liu Qingge did not announce his presence with words. His arrival was signaled only by the crunch of his boots on gravel and the faint, clean scent of steel and cold mountain air that trailed in his wake. He was a monument to silent vigilance.

One evening, he found Shen Yuan standing before a Moon-Eater Fern, its usually luminous leaves now dull and drooping, their edges tinged with brown. Shen Yuan wasn't tending to it. He was simply… staring, his head tilted in a look of profound, uncomprehending loss. The knowledge, the specific alchemy required to save it, had slipped through the cracks in his mind.

Liu Qingge’s brow furrowed. He strode past, his movement a study of efficient purpose. He entered the supply shed and emerged a moment later, a specific ceramic bottle of bluish nutrient solution in his hand.

He did not offer it.

He simply pressed it into Shen Yuan's open palm.

Their fingers brushed—a fleeting contact of calloused, sword-rough skin against cold, slender fragility. No words were exchanged. None were needed. It was the understanding of one warrior to another, an acknowledgment that some battles left wounds no poultice could heal.

The tense quiet was occasionally broken by sparks of forced levity, brief and desperate. Shang Qinghua, buried under a avalanche of scrolls and ledgers for the upcoming Immortal Alliance Conference, finally reached his breaking point.

"Shen-shixiong!" he wailed, his voice cracking as he waved a frantic hand over a massive logistics manifest. "By all the gods, I am begging you! A definitive answer! The Six-Winged Sky Carp! For the inventory, are they 'transportation,' 'decorations,' or 'potential projectiles'?

The liability waivers are a nightmare!"

Shen Yuan, seated at a nearby table and meticulously annotating a scroll on frost-toad migration, did not look up. His brush never paused. "Classify them as 'atmospheric hazards,'" he stated, his voice flat and devoid of inflection. "It's more accurate."

From the courtyard, where he was ostensibly inspecting the structural integrity of a newly repaired gate, came a short, sharp, guttural sound from Liu Qingge. It was not quite a laugh, but it was the closest any living soul had heard in weeks.

But the true, gathering storm was on Qing Jing Peak. Shen Jiu was a maelstrom contained within a shell of silk and ceremony. The image of his brother in the gorge—flawless, victorious, and utterly, terrifyingly brittle—was a splinter in his mind. He needed to pry it out. He needed to see the crack in the porcelain, to force the truth into the open.

He arrived at Ling You’s greenhouse not as a Peak Lord, but as a force of nature. The newly replaced door did not open; it exploded inwards, splintering under the force of his spiritual energy. “Yuan-ge! We need to—!” he began, the accusation a lightning strike on his tongue.

The lightning found no ground.

The scene before him was a still life of exhaustion. Shen Yuan was asleep on a wrought-iron bench, buried under a thick, hand-knitted blanket that smelled faintly of medicinal herbs. His head was tilted back against the wall, his face softened and unguarded in slumber, the harsh lines of worry smoothed away to reveal the ghost of the boy he once was.

And in his lap, cradled in the cradle of his slack, elegant hands, was a relic. A small, formless cloth rabbit, its grey fabric worn thin and shiny in places, its stitches clumsy and coming undone. One button eye was missing, the other hung by a single thread. It was a shameful, precious secret, a testament to a love that had predated cultivation, status, or even a full belly.

(*The dark, suffocating hold of the slaver’s cart. The jolting, the stench, the wails of other children. A small Shen Jiu, frail and burning with fever, was swaddled in thin, filthy rags. His cries were weak, rasping things, more distress than sound.*

A tiny hand, belonging to a five-year-old Shen Yuan, reached out in the darkness. It wasn't food or water he offered—there was none. It was a lump of grey cloth, roughly stitched into a form with long, floppy ears, pilfered from a noble's trash heap. One of its button eyes was missing.

"Shhh, A-Jiu," his brother's voice, too steady for his age, whispered into the stinking dark. He pressed the clumsy cloth rabbit into the infant's clutching hands. "Here. Hold him tight. He's very brave. He'll watch over you. He'll keep the bad dreams away."

Shen Jiu did remember. Not the cart, not the words. But he remembered the rabbit. The feeling of rough, cheap cloth under his fingers. The security of clutching it in his sleep, a tangible shield against the world's cruelties. He had carried it with him, a secret amulet, until the night of the Qiu fire. In the chaos of smoke and screaming, he had dropped it. He'd thought it lost forever, consumed by the same flames that had liberated them, a small, private sacrifice to a larger freedom.

He never knew his brother had seen him drop it. He never knew that Shen Yuan, risking his own escape, had darted back into the inferno not for gold or revenge, but for that single, pathetic scrap of cloth. He never knew it had been saved, a secret relic of a brother's love.)

Shen Jiu hadn't seen it in decades. He had assumed it lost to the flames of the Qiu manor, another piece of their past turned to ash.

Its presence here, now, cradled like the most sacred of artifacts, felt to him, like a silent scream. This was not the infuriating architect of fate. This was the boy from the cart, still trying to protect him from the bad dreams.

All the fury, the sharp-edged words, the need for a confrontation, drained from Shen Jiu, leaving behind a cold, hollow terror that seeped into the marrow of his bones. He stood there for a long, suspended moment. Then, without a sound, he took a single step back, and then another. He turned and left, pulling the shattered door closed as best he could behind him.

The confrontation was over before it began. The chasm between them remained, but it was no longer filled with fire and accusation. Not from his side. It was filled now with a shared, unspoken terror, a dreadful understanding that the ground beneath their feet was crumbling, and the only one who might save them was determined to be the first to fall.

The air on Cang Qiong Mountain was thick with a brittle energy in the days leading to the Immortal Alliance Conference. It was not the healthy buzz of competition, but the strained silence of a family holding its breath. The epicenter of this silence was the space between the two Shen brothers.

Shen Yuan was not an invalid (~~*I am not going to drop dead Liu Qingge!*~~), but he was a man walking a tightrope. The aftermath of the Jue Di Gorge had left a paleness in his complexion that no amount of spiritual energy could quite erase. He performed his duties as Ling You Peak Lord with a remote, meticulous precision, but his disciples had learned to read the signs: the way his gaze would sometimes drift during a lesson, losing its thread for a heartbeat too long, or the careful, measured slowness with which he now moved, as if his body had become a fragile, unfamiliar instrument.

Shen Jiu watched from the remove of his own peak, a silent sentinel to a slow, quiet dying of the light. The vibrant, cunning fire that was his brother was guttering, fading to a pale, uncertain ember. He no longer stormed the paths to Ling You. The memory of a too-bright fire and a brother grown too pale hovered behind his eyelids whenever he thought of confrontation. It was not cowardice, he told himself, sharpening the thought into a weapon against his own unease. A Peak Lord had… priorities. Disciples to hone for the Immortal Alliance Conference. Never mind that the list of participants from Qing Jing Peak remained a blank scroll on his desk, its emptiness a louder accusation than any shout.

His fury, with no external target, turned inward and festered, a hard, cold knot of dread in his stomach. He took it out on his disciples, his critiques becoming scalpels that flayed spirit instead of correcting form, his punishments delivered with a swift, cold finality that left no room for appeal.

When the combined deliberation of the Peak Lords finally forced a finalized list into his hands, his gaze skimmed the names—and snagged. *Luo Binghe.*

The Little Beast. Did the boy think him blind? He saw the thinly veiled excuses, the desperate, clumsy attempts to find reasons to linger on the paths to Ling You, to catch a glimpse of green robes, all in defiance of explicit orders. A fresh wave of bitter heat rose in his chest.

Of course. Of course his brother's baffling, infuriating favoritism would extend its reach here. Was this another layer of some inscrutable scheme? A final, misguided attempt to "save" the boy by thrusting him into the spotlight, as if that would somehow armor him against the world's cruelties? The not-knowing was a constant, corrosive acid, eating away at the foundations of his composure.

His thumb, resting beside the name, could have smudged the ink, consigning the boy to obscurity. The impulse was a sharp, sweet thrill. But he let his hand fall. Let the boy go. Let him see the real world, beyond the sheltered, bizarre oasis of Ling You. It was a bitter, passive-aggressive concession, a small, poisonous seed of retaliation against a brother whose mind had become a locked room to which he had lost the key.

In his most quiet, vulnerable moments, a treacherous thought would whisper: what had he ever done, to be deemed unworthy of a simple truth, an honest explanation, by any of the brothers fate had given and then taken from him?

The Immortal Alliance Conference was a sprawling, vibrant spectacle. A temporary city of colorful pavilions had sprung up in the valley, teeming with the best and brightest junior disciples from every major sect, all buzzing with a competitive fervor that felt alien to the heavy-hearted Cang Qiong delegation.

The Peak Lords observed from a raised dais, a pantheon of power and prestige. Shen Yuan sat with a posture of serene detachment, his Ling You fan resting on his knee. To any observer, he was the picture of a refined, slightly aloof scholar-lord. But from his seat slightly behind and to the side, Shen Jiu could see the minute signs of strain: the too-still set of his shoulders, the way his fingers occasionally tightened on the fan's handle.

It was here that Huan Hua Palace made its presence felt. The Old Palace Master, resplendent in his golden robes, was holding court. His gaze, sharp and calculating, swept over the Cang Qiong sect's leadership and settled, with the unerring instinct of a predator sensing weakness, on Shen Yuan.

He did not approach directly. Instead, he sent an emissary—a senior disciple who bowed with exaggerated respect. "Esteemed Peak Lord Shen Qinghchun of Ling You," the disciple began, his voice carrying. "Our Palace Master could not help but notice your profound knowledge of spiritual fauna. He wonders if you might grace our humble Huan Hua pavilion later? We have a rare, ailing Moon-Tear Phoenix that our healers cannot diagnose. Your… *unique* insight would be invaluable."

It was a public, seemingly gracious offer. But the subtext was a scalpel: *We see you are the expert. We also see you are not well. Come and perform for us*.

Before Shen Yuan could formulate a polite, deflecting reply, a voice, cold and sharp as a shard of winter ice, cut through the air.

"The Ling You Peak Lord's expertise is not a spectacle for Huan Hua's entertainment," Shen Jiu said, not even looking at the disciple, his gaze fixed on the competition grounds below as if the conversation were beneath him. His fan gave a single, dismissive flick. "If your healers are incapable, perhaps your sect should invest in better tutelage rather than begging for assistance at a disciples' competition."

The insult was delivered with such casual, venomous precision that the Huan Hua disciple flushed a deep red, stammering an apology before retreating.

Shen Yuan did not turn to look at his brother. He didn't need to. The protection, as furious and unyielding as it was, wrapped around him like a familiar, if thorny, cloak. He simply gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod, a silent acknowledgment that only the two of them would understand.

On the competition grounds below, Luo Binghe fought with a breathtaking, ferocious grace. He moved like water and struck like lightning, his every move a testament to the hidden, desperate training he had undertaken. His eyes, however, kept flicking towards the dais,

seeking a glimpse of green robes, hoping for a nod of approval from the one man whose opinion mattered. He would win. He would win for *him*.

Liu Qingge, from his place on the dais, watched the matches with a critical eye, offering terse commentary to his fellow Peak Lords. His focus was on the combat, but his spiritual awareness was attuned to the subtle, tense exchange that had just occurred. He said nothing, but his presence was a solid, approving weight at Shen Yuan's back.

Shen Yuan sat with an air of detached calm, but his knuckles were white where he gripped his fan. The System's warnings were a constant, shrieking alarm in his mind.

[WARNING: PROTAGONIST'S DEMONIC HERITAGE AT RISK OF EXPOSURE. NARRATIVE DEVIATION: 18%. HOST MUST RECTIFY.]
[PROPOSED SOLUTION: ALLOW SHEN JIU TO UNCOVER THE TRUTH. PERPETUATE CANONICAL CONFRONTATION.]

No. The refusal was a primal, visceral recoil. The mental image was too clear: Shen Jiu's face, transformed by triumphant, righteous fury, Xiu Ya flashing as he became the villain the story demanded. *I will not let him be the monster. I will not hand him the script for his own destruction.*

[CALCULATING... ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION ACCEPTED. HOST MUST BECOME THE CATALYST. PUSH PROTAGONIST INTO THE ENDLESS ABYSS. REWARD: 10,000 B-POINTS. PENALTY FOR FAILURE: TOTAL SPIRITUAL COLLAPSE.]

The ultimatum was a vice around his soul. He watched Luo Binghe, so bright and full of potential, and felt a wave of nauseating despair.

It was then that the world broke.

As everyone came to the unanimous decision to enter the area themselves, one thing was clear to Shen Yuan.

There had to be a third path.

His mind, trained for years in lateral, desperate strategies, seized on a fragile, audacious hope. *If the revelation never happens, there is no crime. If there is no crime, there is no accuser, and no executioner.*

His plan was simple, terrifying in its reliance on his own crumbling authority. He would be a shield. He would position himself, Shen Qingchun, the unchallenged master of spiritual beasts, as an immovable barrier between A-Jiu and the boy. He would watch Luo Binghe like a hawk, ready to intercept, to deflect, to explain away any stray flicker of demonic energy before his brother's sharp, suspicious eyes could ever see it.

And if the absolute worst occurred… if his heritage was revealed in a way he could not hide with a wave of demonic energy… his reputation would be his final weapon. Let them see the demonic energy. He would simply declare it a fascinating, residual contamination from a powerful beast, a unique symbiotic reaction he was personally studying. His word on such matters was near-sacrosanct. Who would dare question the Ling You Peak Lord's expertise to his face? They would have to accept it. They would have no choice.

It was a shield of paper, held against a tidal wave.

He just had to keep his brother away from him. The rest of the world, he could manage.

He led his brother as away as he possibly could from the Black Moon Rhinoceros Python's natural area of Predeation. Both of them fighting the swarms of demonic creatures back to back. The system's warnings were blaring in his mind, rattling his concentration.

[WARNING: HOST'S PROPOSED DEVIATION THREATENS NARRATIVE COHESION. PROBABILITY OF CATASTROPHIC PLOT FAILURE: 67%.]
[DIRECTIVE: COMPLY WITH SYSTEM SOLUTION. PUSH PROTAGONIST INTO THE ENDLESS ABYSS.]
[PENALTY FOR NON-COMPLIANCE: ACCELERATED SPIRITUAL COLLAPSE. TOTAL CORE FRAGMENTATION IMMINENT.]

A sharp, sickening pain lanced through his golden core, a preview of the collapse the System promised. It felt like his very spirit was being slowly ground to dust between the immutable gears of the plot. The System wasn't just suggesting; it was enforcing. It was making his body the battlefield.

The rhinoceros-python demon's roar was a physical pressure, but it was the shrieking swarm of bat-like imps that turned the competition into a slaughterhouse.

No.

His gaze was locked on one figure in the chaos in front of him. Luo Binghe, a blaze of pure, untamed talent, moved not for glory, but for survival and protection. He saw the boy shove a Huan Hua disciple out of the path of a venomous stinger, taking the brunt of the blow on his own spiritual shield.

(*The Ling You greenhouse, warm and humid. A younger Luo Binghe, face smudged with dirt, carefully held a trembling, multi-legged moth as big as his hand. "It's hurt, Shen-shibo." Shen Yuan had not taken it from him. Instead, he guided the boy's hands with his own, showing him how to apply a poultice of crushed leaves. "Its wing is torn. It needs stability, not pity. Gentleness is a form of strength, Binghe."*
The boy had looked up at him, his eyes wide with the profound honor of being trusted with something so fragile.)

The memory was a knife twisting in Shen Yuan's gut.

Below, the crystalline scorpion-tail struck. A shard of its barb, sharp as a diamond, sliced a deep furrow across Luo Binghe’s forearm. The boy grunted, expecting the familiar copper-scent of blood.

But what welled up was different. It was blood that seemed to swallow the light, shimmering with a faint, unholy aura for a single, damning second before the flesh beneath began to stitch itself back together with an obscene, unnatural speed.

The Huan Hua disciples he had just saved stumbled back, their faces masks of horror.

And then, the voice.

"I knew it."

Shen Jiu stood at the clearing's edge, Xiu Ya a sliver of frozen light in his hand. His face was a sculpture of pure, radiant vindication. All the slights, the paranoia, the seething resentment of a lifetime, coalesced into this one, perfect truth.

"A demon! A beast hiding in my own house! DIE!"

He moved, a tempest of green silk and killing intent, his sword aimed for a clean, final severance.

[ALLOW ACTION TO PROCEED. THIS IS THE CANONICAL PATH.]

The command from the System was not words, but a vision, searing itself behind Shen Yuan’s eyes with the force of a branding iron.

He did not see text. He saw *A-Jiu*.

Not the proud Peak Lord, but his brother, years from now. He saw him not in the elegant halls of Qing Jing, but in a dank, dripping cell that smelled of rust and stagnant water. He saw a hand—Luo Binghe's hand, now adorned with the cruel elegance of a demon emperor's rings—close around A-Jiu's wrist. There was a sound, not a scream, but a sickening, dry *snap*, like a precious jade hairpin breaking under a boot. Xiu Ya, that beautiful, arrogant extension of his brother's spirit, was not just broken, but ground into dust before his eyes.

He saw the light in Shen Jiu's eyes—the sharp, defiant, brilliant light that had once reflected fire in a burning manor—not just extinguished, but methodically *scraped out*, leaving behind two hollow, accepting voids (~~*his limbs were torn of, tongue was pulled out, eye was gouged, blood and pain and viscera)*~~. This was not a death. It was a dismantling. A masterpiece of revenge, and his brother was the canvas.

This was the path. The "canonical" outcome.

To do nothing was to hand his didi the first, fateful thread that would weave the noose around his own neck.

A different memory rose, a shard of glass in his heart. The Ling You greenhouse, warm and humid. Luo Binghe, his face smudged with soil, his hands impossibly gentle as he held a trembling, multi-legged moth. *"It's hurt, Shen-shibo,"* the boy had whispered, his voice full of a reverence usually reserved for sacred texts.

This trusting boy, this *cute sheep* who looked at a venomous creature and saw only its pain, was the one he was meant to condemn. The Endless Abyss was not a place. It was a digestive tract. A realm that consumed hope and excreted monsters. Sending Luo Binghe there was to throw a lamb into a starved lion's den, knowing it must either be torn apart or become the most terrifying predator of all.

His choice was not between good and evil. It was a selection of poisons.

One vial led to his brother’s protracted, soul-murdering ruin.

The other vial led to the brutal corruption of a boy’s spirit, and the death of his own.

He saw Shen Jiu now, in the present, his face alight with a triumphant, righteous fury. Xiu Ya was a sliver of frozen light, poised to deliver what he believed was a just, cleansing kill. It was the look of a man finally cutting a cancer from his life.

Shen Yuan could not let him have that moment. He could not let him believe, for a single second, that he was doing the right thing, only to have that belief repaid with years of agony.

The horror was a physical coldness, spreading from his core to his fingertips. There was no victory. Only a path that led to a slightly less unbearable hell.

He would make himself the villain. He would become the sole, perfect target. He would take the boy’s shattered trust and the world’s condemnation onto his own shoulders. He would let his brother live, even if it meant A-Jiu would live to despise him.

As he took that slow, deliberate step between his brother’s sword and his disciple’s heart, his face became a hollow mask. The horror was too vast for expression. There was only the terrible, chilling calm of a man who had just chosen to burn down his own soul to keep a single, precious flame alive in the darkness.

Luo Binghe stared, his world collapsing into the space between them. Shen-shibo. His shelter in the storm of Qing Jing’s disdain. The one person who had ever looked at him and seen not a street rat or a beast, but a mind worth teaching.

(*The first time Shen Qingchun had offered him tea. Not the dregs others left, but a fragrant, steaming cup from his own personal set. Luo Binghe had been too afraid to drink it, waiting for the catch, the mockery.*

Shen Yuan had simply taken a sip from his own cup first. "It won't bite," he'd said, a faint, real smile in his eyes. "It's just tea."

The warmth had spread through Binghe's chest, more potent than any spiritual energy.)

That warmth was ash now.

Shen Yuan's face was a void. All the gentle humor, the quiet curiosity, the fleeting kindness—it was gone. Erased. What remained was a hollow, chilling resignation. It was the most terrifying thing Luo Binghe had ever seen.

He didn't speak. He didn't offer a lie to soften the blow. His hands, those elegant hands that had once guided his so gently, shot out and grabbed Luo Binghe by the front of his robes. The grip was iron.

The hope in Luo Binghe's eyes didn't just die; it was incinerated, leaving behind a barren wasteland of utter, absolute betrayal.

And Shen Yuan pushed.

The act was serene. A terrible, graceful arc. It was not the violent shove of anger, but the final, deliberate placement of a piece on a board. A clinical disposal. It was so much worse than his Shen Qingqiu's hot fury.

("The world is not fair, Binghe," Shen Yuan had said once, watching him train until his hands bled. "It will try to break you. Your only duty is to survive. No matter what. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Shen-shibo.")

For a moment, Luo Binghe hung in the air, suspended between the world of light and the yawning darkness below. His eyes, wide and shattered, were locked on Shen Yuan's face, desperately searching for a reason, a sign, a flicker of the man he knew.

He found nothing. Only the empty, beautiful mask of a stranger.

Then, he fell.

The last thing he saw was the man who had been his sanctuary, standing at the edge of the abyss, watching him fall into hell, his expression as placid and unreadable as deep, still water.

The world did not simply go silent. Sound was scoured away, leaving a vacuum that pressed against Shen Jiu's eardrums. The triumphant roar that had been building in his chest for the moment he finally unmasked the beast died, unborn. His fingers, clenched white around Xiu Ya's hilt, went numb.

He had seen his brother step forward. Not to stop the beast, but to stop *him*. Shen Yuan's back, a wall of green silk, had shielded Luo Binghe from the killing stroke. For a single, heart-stopping moment, Shen Jiu thought, *He defends it. He stands with the demon against me.*

Then, his brother turned.

The hands that had so often gently handled rare manuscripts and fragile seedlings shot out. They did not grab with fury, but with a terrible, deliberate finality, fisting in the front of the boy's robes. Luo Binghe's face, a moment before etched with terror of *him*, transformed. The

fear melted into wide-eyed, gut-wrenching shock, then a void of pure, absolute betrayal as he stared at Shen Yuan.

And Shen Yuan… his face was a placid lake under a moonless sky. No rage. No righteousness. No pain. Only a hollow, chilling emptiness. He looked at the boy he had tutored, fed, and protected, and with a calm, almost gentle motion, *placed* him backwards into the yawning rift.

It was not an execution. It was a disposal. An erasure. It was not the most horrifying thing Shen Jiu had ever witnessed~~. *(A fire, too bright. "The women didn't do anything," "They could be a liability in the future."... Atleast this one was a demon.)*~~

And yet, "Yuan-ge…" The name was a breath, a shattered thing, torn from a place so deep inside him it had no name. "*Why?*"

His brother swayed, a sapling in a sudden gale. He did not look at Shen Jiu. His glazed eyes scanned the horrified faces of the Huan Hua disciples. He was an actor delivering his final, damning line.

"A quick death…" he rasped, each word a struggle, a stone dragged from the depths of his soul, "…was a mercy. The Abyss… is the only place for his kind."

Then, the strings were cut. He collapsed.

Shen Jiu was moving before the thought formed, catching the terrifyingly light body before it could strike the stone. The weight in his arms was all wrong—brittle bones and cold silk, no substance, no anchor.

In the days that followed, a story had to be built. Yue Qingyuan's gentle, worried questions. The other Peak Lords' silent, demanding stares. Shen Jiu, his own mind a fractured mosaic of confusion and a dawning, sickening dread, constructed the only scaffold that could hold.

"My brother…" he would say, his voice unnaturally flat, his gaze fixed on some middle distance where the world made sense. "He was… overcome." A sharp, precise word. "The beast's betrayal. He had shown it… kindness. It struck deeper than any blade. His mind… is not his own." He painted his brother as a victim of his own soft heart, a tragic figure broken by deceit. It was the only armor he could forge for him.

The Ling You bamboo house had become a sickroom, the air thick with the scent of medicinal herbs and silence. Shen Yuan existed in a state of quiet dissolution. He sat by the window, a heavy blanket over his knees, his gaze fixed on the vibrant, living world outside that seemed to hold no color for him. He was a ghost in his own skin.

Shen Jiu had moved in, a silent, furious shadow. He managed the peak's affairs with cold efficiency, brewed the bitter, restorative teas, and sat for hours in a chair opposite his brother, watching the shallow, fragile rise and fall of his chest. The official diagnosis was a "Heart-Demon of Betrayal," a spiritual sickness born of a good man's shattered trust. But Shen Jiu was not a fool. He could feel the wrongness of it, a fragility that went beyond grief. It was that, but it was not the only thing plaguing him. He could feel the fundamental fault line, a splintering of the spirit that felt… familiar. It reminded him of the Lingxi Caves, as it should, with Mu Qingfan told him.

The silence in the bamboo house was no longer peaceful. It was the silence of a tomb. Shen Jiu sat, the memory of their confrontation not as a heated argument, but as a series of frozen tableaus he could now dissect with chilling precision.

He had accused his brother of theater. But what was a performance, and what was the real cost hidden behind the curtain?

His eyes, once blind with fury, now traced the lines of his brother's sleeping face. He saw things he had refused to see before. Not just the pallor, but a certain… thinness to the spiritual light around him. It wasn't the vibrant, if weary, glow of a Peak Lord. It was the faint, guttering flicker of a candle drowning in its own wax. Mu Qingfang's words were a ghost in his ear: *"The damage is not a heart-demonic backlash. It is a perfect resonance match for the demonic corruption from the caves."*

The memory was a fresh wound, poorly bandaged. He had been so sure. So righteous in his fury.

The memory of the caves themselves resurfaced, not as a blur of pain, but with a new, horrifying clarity. He remembered the moment of crisis—Liu Qingge's core putrefying, his own spiritual energy fraying into nothingness, the welcoming, cold dark closing in. And then… a sensation. Not a surge of his own power, but a presence. Cool, green, and impossibly stable, like the heart of an ancient forest. It had felt like his brother's spiritual signature, but woven into the very fabric of the cave's energy, a pre-packaged algorithm of salvation. He had seized it, used it as a scalpel to scour the poison from Liu Qingge's core. He had thought it a tool his brother had left for him. A clever trick.

He had never once considered it might be a siphon.

The memory was a wound that would not close. Shen Jiu stood once more in that room, his past self a creature of pure, incandescent rage. He heard his own voice, a lash meant to flay:

"You. Your little theater was a resounding success. The grand architect, victorious without a hair out of place."

He had seen arrogance. Now, he saw a performance of wellness so perfect it was a lie. The calm wasn't triumph; it was the absolute concentration of a man holding a vial of poison

inside himself, refusing to let a single drop show.

His brother's reply, which had seemed so dismissive, was a stark ledger of priorities: *"The mountain is secure. The disciples are safe. You are alive. That is the only outcome that matters."*

Alive. He had spat the word back. *"Is that what you call this? To be an instrument you pre-tuned? A flawed mechanism you had to remotely calibrate?"*

Pre-tuned. The accusation now felt grotesque. The "calibration" in the caves—that sudden, cool stability—hadn't been a remote control. It had been a lifeline thrown into a stormy sea. He had felt it as an intrusion because he hadn't understood its nature: it was not a tool to manipulate him, but a channel opening *away* from him. He had been the "flawed mechanism" on the verge of catastrophic failure, and his brother had provided an emergency pressure valve, one that vented the destructive energy directly into his own core.

He heard Mu Qingfang's whisper again, the healer's truth he had willfully ignored: *"It was a targeted antidote... the deepest form of spiritual intimacy, and the deepest violation."*

The intimacy was not a bond. It was knowledge. His brother had studied him, understood the precise spiritual signature of the poison attacking him, and crafted a cure that was a perfect mirror, that was meant and built for him. But for Shen Jiu to use it, he had to accept it, to guide it.

"You knew the array would backlash. You knew his core was a liability. You sent us in, and you had your cure waiting in the wings. You engineered my failure just so you could play the deus ex machina."

You knew. Of course he knew. Shen Yuan saw patterns of disaster where others saw only chance. He hadn't engineered the failure; he had predicted it with terrifying accuracy. He hadn't sent them into a trap; he had followed them into the fire with the only bucket of water, knowing he would have to drink the flames himself to put them out.

His brother’s composure shattered. *"I foresaw a danger. I prepared a countermeasure. Must you always see a conspiracy in my foresight?"*

"IT IS A CONSPIRACY WHEN YOU ARE THE ONE WHO DUG THE TRAP!" he had roared. *"You don't provide a net, you loosen the stones on the cliff!"*

The metaphor was wrong. So terribly wrong. His brother wasn't loosening stones. He was the net. And he wasn't just catching the fall; he was being shredded by the impact, the stones he was accused of loosening tearing through his own flesh and spirit on their way down.

A perfect resonance match.

The phrase was a key turning in a lock he had kept sealed. It meant the poison had been drawn into Shen Yuan with surgical accuracy. It wasn't a side effect. It was the *objective*.

He stood. The need to know was a physical ache, a cold stone in his gut. He found Mu Qingfang not in the infirmary, but in his private study, surrounded by the quiet hum of preserving arrays and the scent of a hundred rare herbs.

"Shen-shixiong," Mu Qingfang said, his voice heavy with a foreknowledge of this visit. He did not look up from the scroll he was annotating.

"The poison," Shen Jiu said, his voice flat, devoid of its usual sharpness. It was the tone of a man ordering an execution. "The one in my brother. You said it was a perfect match."

Mu Qingfang’s brush stilled. He slowly set it down. "It is."

"How?" The single word was a blade.

The healer finally met his gaze. His eyes were not accusing, only profoundly tired. "It is the nature of the poison from the Lingxi Caves. It seeks to invert and consume spiritual energy. To purge it from you and Liu-shixiong without causing a cascading collapse required a… a focal point. A vessel of sufficient stability and complementary energy to draw the corruption into itself, allowing for a targeted purification."

"A vessel," Shen Jiu repeated, the word tasting of ash.

Mu Qingfang nodded, his expression grim. "The spiritual signature required to act as that vessel… it had to be a near-perfect mirror to the recipients, yet strong enough to withstand the corrosion long enough for the transfer to complete." He paused, letting the implication hang in the air like a shroud. "Shen-shixiong… the energy you felt him channel for you was not a tool he gave you. It was a *tether*. It was never meant to be a cure, it was a weapon. You guided the weapon. He became the sinkhole into which the poison was drained."

The clinical description was more horrifying than any scream. A sinkhole. A focal point. A vessel. His brother had not been a puppeteer. He had been a piece of spiritual blotting paper, designed to absorb the stain so the original documents—himself and Liu Qingge—could remain clean.

"And the backlash?" Shen Jiu forced out, his throat tight. "You said there was a void. A spiritual expenditure."

Mu Qingfang's gaze was unwavering. "Containing such a volatile energy, even for a moment, would have been like trying to hold a lightning strike in a teacup. The 'expenditure' was the cost of the cup shattering. He did not just channel the poison, Shen-shixiong. He *contained* its violent release. The backlash you and Liu-shixiong should have suffered would have shattered both your brittle meridians… he intercepted it. He took the blast."

He took the blast.

The words were simple. Devastating.

All the accusations he had flung—of engineering failure, of cultivating disaster—crumbled into dust, revealing the ugly, brutal truth beneath. His brother had not dug a trap. He had seen a landslide coming and thrown himself in front of it.

"My love for you is not a gentle thing, A-Jiu. It is the last line of defense."

It wasn't a metaphor. It was a job description. A job his brother had assigned himself a lifetime ago.

Shen Jiu turned without another word and walked back to the bamboo house. The path was a blur. Each step felt like walking on the bones of his own pride.

He stood once more in the doorway, looking at his brother. The sleeping form in the chair was of the one man who had never hesitated to put Shen Jiu first.

He had spent so long mistaking a fortress for a prison. He had raged at the walls, demanding his freedom, never realizing that every stone in that fortress was a piece of his brother's soul, laid down to keep the wolves at bay. A fortress whose key he already owned.

And now, the fortress was in ruins. The architect was dying within the crumbling walls. And Shen Jiu was left standing in the wreckage, finally understanding that the only thing he had ever truly been a prisoner of was his own blindness.

Chapter 9: The Silence

Chapter Summary

The Silence after.

Chapter Notes

Ok, soo....
This is a short one.

I hope am doing the characters justice, because to me this is what they signify.

and also I like to geek out abt all their personalities, soo.. this feels like heaven. Feel free to skip and read the chapter.

From what I remember in PIDW canon, Shen Jiu was a character often seen as simply cruel and vindictive but if you looked deeper he had been given a tragedy of his own: the tragedy of being so fiercely, catastrophically loved that he never learned to recognize what that love looked like until it was too late.

It was in the form of Yue Qi's sacrifice, when despite everything, when he was sent Shen Jiu's limbs as proof of his horrific torture, he came to Huan Hua Palace, knowing it was a trap and was ambushed by Luo Binghe. Died of a Thousand Arrows. The broken pieces of Xuan Su were swallowed by Shen Jiu to finally commit suicide. Shen Jiu never knew he had ruined his cultivation trying to reach Shen Jiu only to reach too late. Always too late.

I though it fit, to keep that aspect and developed on what he would do if he came to know that such a love might exist, that someone might love him to that extent, not to control him, just because..

Whether it be Yue Qi or Shen Yuan, he is so soo loved, and he loves them soo much in return. I think that was the main reason (in canon) why he stuck around in Cang Qiong, despite not considering even Qing Jing Peak as safe, let alone the other peak lords who villainised him (with good reasons, or misunderstandings.)

From the point of view I am looking at, Yue Qi desperately wants the Shen Brothers to be happy and safe, and even though he loves them equally (a lie, Shen Jiu will always be the baby, the one to be looked after between them), he can't let go of his guilty conscience.
Cue his pandering.

I don't know if it is apparent, but Yue Qi tends to respect Shen Yuan's wishes more, bc he was younger, but never the youngest between them. (I did rant abt Yue Qi's infuriating treatment of Shen Jiu earlier in one of my notes).

So there is a definite difference in how he feels and handles situations with both of them. (Yue Qi still tries to win over Shen Jiu with expensive gifts, which Shen JIu takes as bribes to stay quiet abt their shared history as slaves, while he is just, trying to win over the baby; paranoia vs infantilisation
Any demands, like Shen Jiu demanded a Peak Lord Meeting to show him their annoyance via Shen Yuan, when he realises, he goes, awww.
But any decisions, like the mission they sent Shen Jiu and Liu Qingge to? Shen Yuan's words were final.
Canonically, he would have tried to appease Shen Jiu by sending someone else, and Shen Jiu would take offence and go himself, with Liu Qingge despite fighting with the guy, throughout.)

so. like. I know readers don't read it like that. But I write it thinking of these things.

One person told me that it was a good thing that the story is not under my control, bc that meant I understood the characters' personalities well enough to know when they would do something or the other, regardless of what I personally wanted to happen. That comment meant the world to me. And gave me the confidence to honestly continue with the way I was going, bc honestly, the constant fights, by characters so close to me, I just... know what they would do, it was... so bad. BUt... we have gotten here. I might even complete this thing...
which is like, always an achievement, so thank you for your support.
Ahh it has gotten too long..
Toodaloo!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first sound was a needle, not a chirp.

A single, high-pitched stab in the dark, then another, layering into a jagged chorus that shredded the pre-dawn stillness.

Eyes opened. No tightening of the lips. No sigh. The ceiling was a blank slate.

The single silk sheet was pushed back. The air clung, warm and damp. His hands moved through the ritual of robes—tying, smoothing, settling the final layer. The weight was an anchor.

A soft knock. The door whispered open. Fu Xin entered, his gaze a practiced sweep of the room. No words. A tray was placed—a single celadon cup, pale steam uncurling. He retreated. The door hushed shut.

A memory surfaced, unbidden:

A younger Fu Xin, face still soft with youth, holding a different cup. The liquid inside was dark amber, the air around it spiced with the dangerous sweetness of Viper-Headed Spider honey.

Shen Yuan, seated at his desk, looked up. A real smile, then. A flash of green vitality in his eyes. He accepted the cup. "You remembered."

"Of course, Shizun!" The boy's chest puffed out. "It adds that little kick!"

"It does." The smile widened. He drank. The boy beamed.

Now, the man drinking the pale, scentless tea did not smile. The current Fu Xin did not beam. He provided what was necessary.

Fingers curled around the warmth of the celadon cup. His gaze drifted, past the improperly drawn curtains, to the windowsill.

A Jade-Eyed Fern in a terracotta pot. Its fronds were a perfect, deep green spiral. Too perfect. A geometry so precise it seemed unnatural.

The hand not holding the cup lifted. Slow. Deliberate. The index finger pressed the tip of one specific frond.

The frond pressed back. Firm. Resilient.

A breath escaped him, a silent plume that briefly fogged the surface of his tea. His shoulders lost a tension so minute it was invisible.

Outside, the sparrows screamed at a sun not yet risen. He did not hear them.

The walk to Qiong Ding Peak was a study in controlled motion. Shen Yuan’s pace was measured, each step a deliberate placement of weight. The vibrant greens of the Ling You foliage seemed muted to him, washed out, as if he were viewing the world through a layer of fine ash.

The meeting hall was an oven. The air was thick and still, heavy with the scent of warm cedar and the collective spiritual pressure of eleven powerful cultivators. Shen Yuan took his seat, the rustle of his robes unnaturally loud in the stifling quiet. He did not look at anyone, his gaze fixed on a whorl in the wood grain of the table before him.

Yue Qingyuan’s voice was a gentle, persistent drone, but the topic was not fonts. "—disturbing reports from our trading partners along the western routes," he was saying, his tone carefully neutral. "Caravans bearing our insignia have been... harassed. Goods damaged. No one was seriously injured, but the perpetrators always vanish. The witnesses... they claim the assailants made specific, derogatory comments about our sect's... current stability."

He paused, letting the implication hang in the humid air. The unspoken words were *Huan Hua Palace*. Everyone knew of their recent smugness, their whispered campaigns.

A shift in the air. Liu Qingge, a contained storm of impatience, let out a sharp breath. "Pointless provocation. They attack trade routes instead of facing us directly. If they want a fight, they should come here and say it to our faces." He crossed his arms, his disdain for the indirect political manoeuvring palpable. "Instead of wasting time on cowardly games, we should be dealing with real problems. Like those shrieking pests on Ling You. A single sweep of Cheng Luan would bring permanent quiet."

A single, definitive, violent solution.

The memory was not an image, but a sensation: the feel of rough disciple robes under his hands, the terrible, graceful arc of a push, the void swallowing a look of shattered trust. *Like a push.* The solution he had chosen. The one he would not, could not, make again. Not if there was another way. Any other way.

Shen Yuan's thumb stroked the polished wood of his closed fan.

"The pattern is the provocation itself," Shen Yuan said, his voice a low, calm ripple that cut through the budding arguments. All other sound ceased. He did not look up. "They do not seek a battle. They seek to demonstrate that our influence is perishable. That our symbols can be tarnished. It is a slow, patient corrosion. Not an attack on the root, but a spoiling of the fruit."

He stated it as one would state that water was wet. A simple, dismal fact of political nature.

From down the table came the frantic rustle of parchment. Shang Qinghua, mopping his brow with a sleeve, muttered into a scroll. "...revised projections for the Spirit-Spring run-off, accounting for the new... *temperamental dampness* in the eastern quadrant... The foundational stability is, of course, paramount..."

To anyone else, it was the anxious rambling of an overworked logistician. To Shen Yuan, it was a needle-thin thread of inquiry. *'With this new external pressure, does our project's foundation hold?'*

Shen Yuan's eyes remained on the whorled wood. He did not turn his head. But he closed his eyes. Not in weariness, but with a slow, deliberate finality, holding the gesture for a single, measured heartbeat before opening them again.

The foundation holds. Proceed.

Yue Qingyuan turned to Shang Qinghua. "The Artificer Peak's requisition for the new quarter..."

Shang Qinghua flinched, unrolling another scroll. "Ah, yes! The... the 'high-stability, non-conductive Cerulean Quartz' allotment. For... for the reinforcement of the western seed vaults against... *atmospheric resonance*?"

The Artificer Peak Lord, a stout woman with ink-stained fingers, bristled. "The quartz is a standard, high-quality material for reinforcing spiritual arrays! My disciples' work is not—"

"The existing vaults are sufficient," Shen Yuan interrupted, his voice still flat, but now carrying a faint, dismissive edge. He did not look at her. "The Cang Qiong budgets are not a subsidy for Artificer Peak's over-specification. The request is redundant." He finally lifted his gaze to Yue Qingyuan. "If there is nothing else that concerns my peak directly, Zhangmen-shixiong."

The dismissal was public, arrogant, and entirely in character. The Artificer Peak Lord spluttered, Shang Qinghua wilted. Shen Yuan had withdrawn from the conversation as effectively as if he had stood and left the room. He had offered his bleak truth, affirmed his secret plan, and secured his component, all without a single trace of the man who would have once reveled in verbally eviscerating the entire proceeding. The real work was not here. It was waiting in the quiet of his study. This was just noise.

Liu Qingge found him in the bamboo house as the afternoon sun began to slant. He didn't announce himself.

Shen Yuan was at his desk, a still figure amidst a sea of parchment. He didn't look up. His entire world had narrowed to the tip of his brush and the vast sheet of vellum spread before him.

Liu Qingge stood for a moment, watching. He'd seen Shen Yuan work before—with a kind of vibrant, sharp-focused energy. This was different. This was a deep, consuming silence that seemed to swallow the very light in the room. He was mapping sparrows. The lines were meticulous. Pointless.

Shen Yuan's hand paused. He set one brush down and picked up another, finer one, dipping it in vermillion ink. His eyes lifted to an older, yellowed scroll—a chart of the moon, covered in dense numbers. His gaze tracked between the two documents, his brow furrowed in grim determination.

He made a single, tiny mark on the vellum in red. Then another. They weren't corrections. They were placements. Nodes.

Liu Qingge didn't understand it. He didn't need to. He walked to the corner, picked up a heavy training weight, sat on the floor, and began a series of slow, controlled lifts.

He didn't speak. He didn't ask. He simply sat, the solid, rhythmic sound of his breathing the only noise accompanying the scratch of the brush. This was their ritual. A steady, physical presence in the room, a bulwark against the silent storm raging inside the man at the desk.

He lifted the weight until the light failed and the characters on the page blurred into gray smudges. Only when the brush was set aside, when Shen Yuan leaned back, his body sagging with a profound exhaustion, did Liu Qingge stop.

He stood, replaced the weight, and gave a single, curt nod. *I am leaving now. The day is over.*

He walked out, leaving the scholar to his silence. He didn't understand the maps. But he understood the need to face a difficult task. And he understood the value of not facing it alone.

The light had bled from the sky, leaving the bamboo house in deep blue shadow. Shen Yuan sat at his desk, the intricate vellum a ghost in the gloom. The frantic energy was gone, leaving his hands still and heavy on the table, ink staining his knuckles.

The door slid open without a sound. Shen Jiu stood on the threshold. His sharp eyes took in the scene: the unlit room, the cold tea, the way his brother seemed carved from the same weary stone as the desk. A familiar, cold dread coiled in his stomach.

He didn't speak. He stepped inside, walked to the stand where Xiu Ya rested, drew the sword, and sat. Then he began to clean it.

(It had been an evening much like this one, over a year ago now. They had been watching the sun set behind the distant, bustling outline of An Ding Peak, painting the sky in silent, fiery strokes.

Into that stillness, Shen Jiu had spoken, his voice so quiet it was almost lost to the breeze.

"Why?"

He hadn't needed to specify. The question had hung in the air between them for weeks, a specter in the space between one breath and the next. It had lingered through shared silences and cups of tea, concerning the weakness in Shen Yuan's hands, the new, permanent carefulness in his movements.

Shen Yuan had watched the final sliver of sun vanish, leaving the world in twilight. The answer, when it came, felt as inevitable as the coming dark.

"Because a world without you in it isn't a world I want," he said, his voice soft but clear, a stone dropped into a still pond. "It's just a place."

He turned his head then, meeting his brother's gaze in the dimming light. His eyes were not filled with passion, but with a terrible, serene clarity.

"Every calculation I have ever made begins with that variable, A-Jiu. Your continued existence." He spoke like a scholar defining a universal constant, the first principle of a private cosmos. "It is the one fixed point. The immovable star I navigate by. Everything else

—my health, my reputation, my conscience... (~~the fate of a boy with trusting eyes)~~ —all of it is a negotiable term in the equation."

He pressed on, gentle and merciless.

"In the caves, the equation was simple: your spiritual collapse, or mine. There was no 'why.' There was only ever the solution."

He let that hang for a moment, the brutal simplicity of the choice.

"You ask why I never tell you," Shen Yuan continued, his voice dropping to a near-whisper. "It is because you would try to argue with the axiom. You would try to insert your own life as a negotiable term. You would try to sacrifice yourself."

He let out a slow, weary breath, the sound of a man who has carried this logic for a lifetime.

"And that... that is the one outcome my universe cannot compute. It is a logical error. A paradox that would unravel everything. So," he finished, the finality absolute, "I do not allow the variable to be debated.")

The soft *shink-shink* of the whetstone was a familiar rhythm, a sound from a hundred different nights. It was a sound that said, *I am here.*

The sound carved a space in the thick silence. Shen Yuan’s gaze drifted towards his brother. In the dim light, Shen Jiu’s profile was sharp, a survivor honed to a razor's edge.

A complicated weight settled in Shen Yuan’s chest. He looked at this man and felt the absolute certainty of his choice. He would do it all again.

But the cost was a cold, hollow space inside him. His eyes flickered to a specific, slightly warped floorboard near his bookshelf.

Shen Jiu’s hand stilled. He had seen the glance. He saw the secret. Every instinct screamed to demand an answer. To pry up the board.

But he didn't.

The memory was a shard of ice: himself, years ago, screaming in this room, demanding transparency. "You are making a fool of me!" It had gotten him a chasm. A brother who retreated into a silence so profound it nearly killed them both.

He looked at Shen Yuan—the profound exhaustion, the ink-stained hands, the shoulders that carried a weight he now knew was meant for *him*—and he made a choice.

He lowered his eyes. The whetstone resumed its motion, the sound a little softer. A deliberate acceptance. A silent promise.

I see your secret. I will not force you to show it to me. I will sit with you in the dark you have created for my sake.

He would be the guardian of this silence, not its interrogator. The warped floorboard could keep its secret. For now, it was enough that they were on the same side of the door.

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't noticed it yet, each and every character is already acting differently than in canon in accordance to their own feelings which have developed in this reality. Yes, *feelings.*

Also, in Shen Yuan's own perspective, he's completely fine, he's doing his work and everything, he's just a little weak and a little sad, due to what happened, the others are over exaggerating. Unfortunately, Shen Jiu and Yue Qi along with the rest of the Cang Qiong Peak Lords have closed ranks around him—the Cang Qiong Peak Lord solidarity and all, Live together, ascend together, that thing.

So no grieving widow rumours, especially under Shen Jiu, the resident viper's watchful eyes.

Chapter 10: The Reunion

Chapter Summary

And so the plot progresses...

Chapter Notes

Sorry, I was out of station, so didn't post yesterday.

The first sign of the coming storm was not thunder, but a whisper.

It began in the teahouses and trading posts along the western routes, carried by disciples in the gold-and-white robes of Huan Hua Palace. Their words were always veiled in concern, their tones laced with pity.

"One must admire Cang Qiong Mountain's loyalty," a Huan Hua elder would sigh, shaking his head over a cup of tea. "To maintain such steadfast support for a Peak Lord in such... *declining* health. The strain on their resources must be immense."

In another town, a group of junior disciples would "innocently" wonder aloud: "Is it true the Qing Jing Peak Lord's famed intellect has become... unpredictable? So volatile? A shame, truly. The disciples there must live in constant anxiety."

The poison was subtle, designed not to provoke a direct confrontation, but to erode.

Within the serene halls of Qiong Ding Peak, Yue Qingyuan received the reports. His face, usually a mask of gentle diplomacy, settled into a terrifying, placid calm.

A week later, a merchant in a bustling border town—a man who had recently made a small fortune peddling salacious scrolls detailing the Qing Jing Peak Lord's supposed descent into madness—awoke to a strange silence. His back storage room, where his most valuable and inflammatory stock was kept, was utterly pristine and utterly empty. The door was still locked from the inside. The only thing out of place was a single, perfect Qiong Ding Peak maple leaf resting on the now-dusty floorboards. The merchant never spoke of the incident again.

Elsewhere, a Huan Hua disciple known for his particularly loud and cutting "worries" about the Ling You Peak Lord's constitution was found by his fellows at the edge of a dense forest. He was physically unharmed, but his eyes were vacant, his fingers plucking nervously at his robes.

He kept muttering about a shadow that had no face, a presence that had simply watched him until his own golden core, frayed by a terror he couldn't name, had nearly unravelled. He was placed on indefinite medical leave. The official report cited a "cultivation mishap."

Yue Qingyuan never spoke of these events.

Shen Jiu heard the reports, delivered by a quietly gleeful Ming Fan. A slow, cold, vicious satisfaction uncoiled in his chest. Let them learn what happened to those who bit the hand that, for all its failings, was still attached to the most powerful sect in the land. He offered no praise, no acknowledgment to Yue Qingyuan. To do so would feel like a betrayal of the boy who had waited in the Qiu manor, believing himself forgotten. The man’s actions now were a confusing, contradictory script. Why this ruthless defense, when that long-ago rescue had never come? The only logical conclusion was that this wasn’t about protection, but about asset management. Yue Qingyuan was merely pruning threats to his sect’s reputation, and Shen Jiu, the perpetual problem, was just another valuable, troublesome resource to be secured.

The confusion festered, until he found himself on the veranda of Ling You Peak, watching his brother stare into nothingness.

“The merchant in Cuijing,” Shen Jiu said abruptly, the words sharp in the quiet. “The one who sold those lies. His shop was cleaned out. Not a scratch on the door.”

Shen Yuan didn’t turn. “I heard.”

“And that Huan Hua fool who wouldn’t stop running his mouth. A ‘cultivation mishap’.” The sarcasm was a blade.

A faint, weary sigh. “Also heard.”

Shen Jiu’s fan snapped open, a nervous, aggressive gesture. “He’s being… thorough.”

This time, Shen Yuan turned his head. The deep, quiet understanding in his eyes was unsettling.

“He always is, A-Jiu. When it matters to him.”

(They were sixteen and ten, shivering in a lean-to during a relentless autumn rain. A-Jiu was burning with fever again. Yue Qi returned, soaked and empty-handed after a day of begging, his face a mask of helpless pity that made Shen Jiu sneer in disgust. But then, from his sleeve, Qi-ge produced a single, perfect pear, its skin unbruised, a treasure amidst the filth. He gave it to Shen Yuan with a quiet, "For A-Jiu." To Shen Jiu, it was proof of Qi-ge's sentimentality and incompetence—risking a whole day for a single piece of fruit when they needed real food or medicine. But Shen Yuan, meeting Qi-ge's gaze, saw no pity there. He saw the faint, fresh scratch on his cheek, the way he held his left arm stiffly. He saw the cold, grim calculation. Qi-ge hadn't begged for the pear. He had stolen it, likely from a cart guarded by a vicious dog or a ruthless merchant. He had judged that the risk was worth the potential of cutting A-Jiu's fever with something fresh, something that wasn't rotten scraps. The pear wasn't a gesture of kindness. It was a tactical resource, acquired through silent, efficient violence. He had been, as always, terrifyingly thorough. Shen Yuan couldn’t even blame him. He understood the calculus perfectly. He had, that very night, left A-Jiu shivering alone to lift two fresh buns from a distracted vendor, his own heart a cold, hard stone in his chest. They were two sides of the same tarnished coin, doing what was necessary. The only difference was that Shen Yuan had never been foolish enough to look sorry about it.)

The words landed not as a comfort, but as a key turning in a locked door inside Shen Jiu's mind. *When it matters to him.* The memory of the Lingxi Caves, of a poison siphoned silently into his brother's core, rose with brutal clarity. *He always is.*

Was this the same? Was this ruthless, silent safeguarding not a new, confusing behaviour, but the true shape of Yue Qingyuan's devotion? A thing of shadows and consequences, utterly failing in the grand, heroic gestures but terrifyingly efficient in the dark?

The thought was a dangerous, hopeful poison. It slithered through the cracks in his armour, whispering a terrifying question: *Was it possible?*

Did these ruthless, silent acts mean that his Qi-ge cared for him? Not as a sect leader for a Peak Lord, but as Qi-ge for Xiao Jiu? Was he a fool to hope for such a thing? To hope for a love that mirrored the terrifying devotion of his brother—a love so fierce that Shen Yuan's own well-being had never seemed to factor into the equation, not in the Qiu manor, not in the Lingxi Caves, not now.

It was a love that should have felt suffocating. A love that had almost broken its giver. And yet, a wretched, starved part of Shen Jiu wanted to glut himself on it. He wanted that same single-minded focus from Qi-ge, that same proof that he was the axis around which someone else's world turned, even if the cost was ruinous. He wanted to be worth that kind of catastrophic love.

And that, he realized with a jolt of self-loathing, made him the most pathetic sort of fool. He was that same boy in the Qiu manor, shivering in the dark, not just hoping for a rescue, but praying for a specific kind of saviour. He was still waiting at that damned door, forever hoping the handle would turn and the right person would finally be on the other side.

The shame was a cold wave, washing over him. But as it receded, it left behind a single, bedrock certainty, cold and hard as a river stone. His gaze fell upon his brother's hand. Without a word, Shen Jiu reached out and covered it with his own, his grip fierce and unyielding.

This was the only truth that mattered. This hand had held his in the dark, had pulled him from the fire, had never once let go. Let the world whisper. Let Qi-ge play his shadow games. The

only devotion that had ever proven real was the one that had never hesitated to get its hands dirty. In that silent, desperate clasp was a vow: they were each other's first and last defense.

Everyone else was expendable..

The quiet on Ling You Peak was broken by the frantic arrival of a Qiong Ding messenger. The disciple bowed deeply, his face pale.

"Zhangmen-shixiong requests your immediate presence. Urgent news from the western provinces."

In the main hall, the atmosphere was tense. Yue Qingyuan stood before a large map, his finger resting on a city marked 'Jinlan'.

"A plague," he stated, his voice stripped of its usual gentleness. "It emerged three days ago. The symptoms are... severe. Rapid physical decay. Huan Hua Palace has cordoned the city but has been unable to identify the cause or slow its spread. They are requesting assistance."

Shen Jiu's fan snapped shut. "Since when does Huan Hua request our assistance? This is a trap, or a display of their own incompetence."

"Perhaps both," Mu Qingfang said, his brow furrowed. "But if the reports of the symptoms are accurate, the suffering is immense. Our help is needed, regardless of their motives."

Liu Qingge crossed his arms. "Then we go. We find the source and eliminate it."

All eyes turned to Shen Yuan. He had been silent, his gaze fixed on the map as if he could divine the plague's nature from the parchment itself. He finally spoke, his voice low and measured.

"Rapid decay... Unidentified cause..." He looked up, his focus sharpening. "The ecological imbalance required for such a pathogen is significant. I will need to see the environment firsthand. Soil, water, the local flora and fauna. There will be traces."

The decision was made. The delegation was formed by unspoken agreement: Shen Yuan to study the plague's nature, Mu Qingfang to treat the victims, Shen Jiu to navigate the political quagmire, and Liu Qingge to serve as their blade.

They departed within the hour. As they flew, Shen Yuan observed the passing landscape, his mind a calm, analytical engine processing variables of climate, spiritual ley lines, and known demonic toxins. He was a scholar approaching a complex problem, the foremost expert in his field.

He was prepared for a puzzle.

He was not prepared for the reality of Jinlan City.

The air in Jinlan City was a viscous tapestry of scorched incense, putrefaction, and dust. It clung to the back of the throat, a physical taste of despair. The Cang Qiong delegation carved a path through the suffering.

Liu Qingge moved like a honed blade, his spiritual pressure a clean, sharp ward that pushed back the clinging miasma. A few paces behind, Shen Jiu’s emerald robes were a splash of venomous colour against the grey, his fan held still, his eyes missing nothing, cataloguing failures and weaknesses with cold precision. Mu Qingfang was a vortex of muted activity, his hands and those of his disciples a blur of needles, poultices, and gentle but firm restraint.

And then there was Shen Yuan.

He moved as if through deep water, each step deliberate, his gaze a tangible thing that swept over the scenes of ruin not with revulsion, but with a devastating, analytical focus. His eyes traced the blackened veins crawling up a victim’s neck, noted the specific, sickly green hue of the spiritual decay, his mind a silent, frantic scroll annotating the horrific data of the plague.

It was then his focus snagged on a point of incongruous order amidst the chaos, a figure that was clearly the Huan Hua head disciple.

While other Huan Hua disciples clustered in nervous, gilded knots, their eyes darting toward the city's main gate as if awaiting a parade, their Head Disciple was on his knees in the filth. He supported the head of a trembling elder, murmuring quiet assurances, his spotless golden robes now stained with mud and something darker. Shen Yuan’s gaze, ever parsing patterns, noted the subtle void of space the other Huan Hua disciples maintained around him. They took his orders with nods, but their attention was a compass needle fixed elsewhere.

Noting Shen Yuan’s approach, the child in personable gold looked up. He carefully settled the elder against a wall and rose, offering a bow that was both perfectly formal and genuinely respectful. "This Gongyi Xiao greets Esteemed Peak Lord Shen. The primary healing ward is established in the central square. The epicenter of the outbreak is two streets east. This one can guide you."

His voice was calm, his demeanour stripped of the preening arrogance Shen Yuan had learned to associate with the gold-and-white robes. It was a quiet offer of competence in a sea of incompetence and posturing.

A fraction of the tension in Shen Yuan’s shoulders eased. "Lead the way," he replied, his voice low.

He fell into step behind the Huan Hua disciple, his mind already turning from the general horror to the specific puzzle of the plague’s origin point.

The shift in the air was instantaneous.

It was not a sound, but a pressure drop, a deep, resonant chill that had nothing to do with the weather. The very light seemed to dim. The chattering Huan Hua disciples fell into a sudden, deep silence, their postures snapping to a uniform, eager attentiveness, all facing the same direction.

Shen Yuan froze mid-step.

His head turned, not with the swift jerk of surprise, but with the slow, dreadful inevitability of a man confirming his own execution. He knew this spiritual signature. It was a stain on his soul, a frequency his very bones recognized. And it was years, *years*, too early.

From the shadowed mouth of a collapsed merchant's stall, Luo Binghe emerged.

He was a silhouette carved from the city's gloom, his presence devouring the scant light. He ignored the synchronized, almost worshipful bows of the Huan Hua disciples. His eyes, twin pools of bottomless black, swept past Liu Qingge's instantly drawn sword, past Shen Jiu's venomous glare, past Mu Qingfang's stilled hands.

They locked, with the force of a physical impact, onto Shen Yuan.

And then, they flickered—a fractional, almost imperceptible shift—to the space beside him. To Gongyi Xiao, who stood poised, a respectful guide in the midst of hell.

The world did not so much shatter for Shen Yuan as it simply… stopped.

The moans of the sick, the map in his mind, the five-year countdown that had been the bedrock of his every waking thought—it all dissolved into a silent, white-noise scream. His carefully constructed defenses, his secret plans, the fragile peace he had woven—all of it was rendered obsolete in the space of a single, devastating heartbeat.

His hand, which had been resting at his side, went perfectly, terrifyingly still. The subtle tremor that was his constant companion was gone, frozen solid.

The only thought that resonated, a stark and final verdict in the frozen landscape of his mind, was a simple, catastrophic realization:

He’s early.

Luo Binghe stood at the mouth of the alley, blocking the grey light. He had been carved from the boy Shen Yuan remembered into something broader, sharper, his Huan Hua robes a poor disguise for the sheer presence he now carried. His gaze was a tangible weight, tracing the lines of Shen Yuan's face with an intensity that felt less like recognition and more like an appraisal.

"Shen-shibo," he said, his voice a low, controlled baritone that held none of its former youth. "I heard you were here. Leading the investigation."

He took a single, smooth step forward. The space between them halved, the air growing taut.

"I have some... experience with maladies of this nature," he continued, his eyes dark and unblinking. "The Huan Hua healers are competent, but limited. My resources could be of assistance to you." A faint, humourless smile touched his lips. "I would see this resolved quickly."

Shen Yuan’s posture, trained but weary, went rigid. His chin lifted, a defensive reflex. The offer felt like a noose being gently offered, not a lifeline. *He’s here to oversee. To ensure his plans aren’t disrupted. He’s telling me he has the power to ‘resolve’ this, with or without me.*

"Huan Hua's resources are substantial," Shen Yuan replied, his voice crisp and distant, the tone he used for inconvenient junior disciples. "Cang Qiong will manage its own investigation." He pushed off from the wall, a subtle shift that put another inch of space between them. "Do not trouble yourself on our account."

The faint smile vanished from Luo Binghe's face. The politeness in his eyes cooled, hardening into something flat and impenetrable. The rejection was absolute. The minute retreat was a flinch of pure distaste.

The moment was shattered as Shen Jiu appeared, a silent green shadow inserting himself between his brother and the perceived threat. His hand rested on Xiu Ya’s hilt. A heartbeat later, Liu Qingge completed the barrier, his massive frame a wall of silent, promised violence.

Luo Binghe’s gaze swept over the two Peak Lords, then returned to Shen Yuan, who stood protected within their ranks. His expression did not change, but a profound cold seemed to radiate from him.

"I see," he said, the words soft and final. "My mistake for offering."

He gave a short, correct bow and turned away. The echo of his footsteps was the only sound, a slow, deliberate retreat that felt more like an advance.

The air in the plague ward was thick with the scent of demonic rot and despair. Mu Qingfang’s usually calm hands were clenched, his knuckles white as he examined a patient. "This is no natural illness," he murmured, his voice tight. "The decay is... intelligent. It targets the very core of one's spiritual foundation."

Shen Yuan stood a few feet away, holding a withered leaf. His face was a pale, bloodless mask, but his eyes were a chaotic storm. He wasn't seeing the leaf. He was seeing a different face, one carved from memory and nightmare.

The Ling You study, filled with the golden light of a late afternoon. A younger Luo Binghe, perhaps fifteen, stood before Shen Yuan’s desk, practically vibrating with nervous pride. He held out a meticulously crafted lacquer box.

“This disciple noticed Shibo often works through the night,” Luo Binghe said, his voice a blend of hope and trepidation. “I... I prepared something to help maintain your energy.”

Inside the box were six perfect, glistening dumplings, their skins translucent, each pleated with impossible precision. The aroma that rose was intensely, overwhelmingly sweet—the distinct, cloying scent of Five-Petal Blossom Honey, a flavor Shen Yuan had always found sickly and overpowering.

Shen Yuan looked from the dumplings to the boy's face, which was shining with the effort of this offering. He saw the hope there, the desperate desire to be of use, to please. A fond, almost aching warmth bloomed in his chest for this earnest, ridiculous child.

He picked up the jade chopsticks Luo Binghe had also provided. "Your dedication is noted," Shen Yuan said, his tone softer than usual. He took a single, deliberate bite. The honey flooded his mouth, thick and suffocating. He managed to swallow without a flinch. "The craftsmanship is exceptional, Binghe."

He set the chopsticks down, offering a small, approving nod. "Thank you."

It was enough. Luo Binghe's face lit up like a sunrise, a brilliant, relieved smile breaking through his nervousness. He bowed deeply, the box still held out. "This disciple is happy to be of service!"

Shen Yuan did not see the moment the boy's eyes flickered to the single, half-eaten dumpling left on the plate. He did not see the way that brilliant smile faltered for a heartbeat, the flicker of realization that the praise had been for the thought behind the gift, not the gift itself. He did not see the slight droop of Luo Binghe's shoulders as he retreated, the unspoken question hanging in the air: What does he truly like?

Shen Yuan only remembered the boy's happy smile, a memory that now felt like a mockery. That earnest, sweet-toothed disciple was a ghost. The man who had taken his place dealt in plagues and public ruin, his offerings now laced with a far more potent and deadly poison.

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He's here. He's early. The thought was a cold, sickening dread that coiled in his gut, threatening to unravel him. *Everything I planned for... it's all for nothing.*

His brother's voice, sharp as a whip crack, sliced through his internal spiral. "Yuan-ge."

Shen Jiu stood beside him, his presence a solid, furious anchor. His gaze was not on the plague victims, but on Shen Yuan's face, reading the silent panic there with terrifying accuracy. His own thoughts were a protective, vicious snarl. *That little beast. He dares to show his face and unman my brother like this?* He remembered a different time, a different alley—the two of them, children, hiding from slavers. Yuan-ge had worn that same hollow, frozen look then, just before he'd stepped forward to offer himself in Shen Jiu's place. It was the face of a man who felt hunted.

Shen Yuan flinched, the sound of his name jolting him back to the present. He looked down at the leaf in his hand, crushed beyond recognition by his unconscious grip. He forced his fingers to relax, letting the fragments fall to the ground.

"The pattern," he said, his voice hoarse, forcing the words out. He pointed a trembling hand toward the western district. "It's a hunting pattern. Sower demons. They nest where spiritual energy pools." He turned to Liu Qingge, who stood like a statue of vengeance. "Find the nest. Don't let them touch you."

Liu Qingge's eyes narrowed, but he gave a single, sharp nod and vanished.

As the War God left, Shen Yuan's shoulders sagged for a fraction of a second before he locked them straight again. He had sent away their strongest fighter. Was he making the right choice, or playing directly into the hands of the enemy he now knew was watching? The clinical part of his mind screamed that it was the logical move. He was here to do a job. To help people. The terrified, *human* part of him whispered that he had just made a catastrophic error.

Shen Jiu watched it all, his fan now utterly still in his hand. He saw the tremor his brother tried to hide, the way his gaze darted toward the alley where Luo Binghe had appeared. He saw the ghost of the boy from the Qiu manor in his brother's eyes, the one who calculated survival at the cost of his own soul. And he knew, with a cold, sinking certainty, that the real

plague in Jinlan City was not the sower demons, but the devastating return of the one person who could shatter Shen Yuan completely.

The hunt for the sowers had been a brutal, bloody affair. Liu Qingge, a force of nature with Cheng Luan, had carved a path through the city's underbelly. It was Luo Binghe, however, with an uncanny, almost preternatural knowledge of the demons' movements, who had cornered the last surviving creature. The efficiency of their unlikely partnership had been unsettling. Now, the captured demon knelt in the central square, bound in light, before a ring of silent, grim-faced cultivators.

An elder’s voice boomed. "Demon! Name your master!"

The sower demon’s head jerked. Its faceted eyes scanned the crowd and stopped. A single, chitinous limb rose with terrible precision, pointing directly at Shen Yuan.

"The Ling You Peak Lord!" the creature shrieked. "He is our master! He commanded the feast!"

The silence that fell was profound. All eyes swivelled to Shen Yuan.

For a heartbeat, he was utterly still, his face a pale canvas of pure shock. Then, a cold, dreadful understanding washed over him. His gaze sharpened, moving past the stunned faces of his allies with a strategist's cold logic. It landed, with inevitable certainty, on Luo Binghe.

The young man stood with the Huan Hua disciples, his expression unreadable. But to Shen Yuan, that neutrality was a masterstroke. *Of course. He hunted them not to help, but to provide the final, 'irrefutable' witness. He orchestrated this entire display. This is his public execution.*

He looked at Luo Binghe not with a plea, but with a grim acknowledgement of the checkmate.

Across the square, Luo Binghe met his gaze. Shen Yuan saw the young man's face go perfectly, chillingly blank. He saw the brief, almost imperceptible tightening of his jaw, the way his hands curled into loose fists at his sides. To anyone else, it might have looked like shock or anger at the accusation. But to Shen Yuan, filtered through the grim narrative of PIDW, it was the reaction of a consummate actor, carefully controlling his features to sell the lie. The faint, dark piercingly hot, light, that seemed to flicker deep within his eyes for a single moment? Surely, the gleam of triumphant malice, quickly veiled.

Luo Binghe offered no denial. He simply stood there, a silent, handsome statue amid the chaos he had engineered, and in his manufactured stillness, Shen Yuan saw the confirmation of every terrible fear he had carried since the day of the push. The protagonist of the narrative had not come for a quick death. He had come for a soul-scouring ruin.

The silence in the square was a held breath, shattered by a voice like cracking ice.

“You.”

All eyes turned from Shen Yuan to a woman pushing through the crowd. Her robes were plain, her face pale and etched with a grief that had festered for years. She was a ghost given flesh.

Qiu Haitang.

Her finger, trembling with a palpable mix of terror and hatred, pointed at Shen Yuan. “Shen Yuan. Do you remember the Qiu manor? The family that took in a pair of worthless street rats? My brother…” Her voice broke, but her gaze was unflinching. “You ate our food, slept under our roof. And you repaid us by setting a fire that burned them all alive!”

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd. The demon's accusation was one thing; this was a human tragedy, a story of betrayal anyone could understand.

(The heat of the fire was at their backs, a beast roaring in triumph. Before them, in the flickering orange light, Qiu Jianluo lay sprawled in the dirt, not yet dead. His eyes were wide, his mouth working soundlessly. A-Jiu stood over him, a heavy, blood-slicked rock in his small hands. He wasn't crying. He was just staring, his chest heaving. Shen Yuan didn't tell him to stop. He didn't look away. He watched, his own hands clean, as his brother brought the rock down. Again. And again. Until the only sound was the fire and their own ragged breathing. They had walked away from that, too.)

The reaction from his brother was not one of denial, but of pure, incandescent fury. Shen Jiu's fan snapped shut with a sound like a bone breaking. The colour drained from his own face, but his eyes burned. The name 'Qiu' was a key turning in a lock he had sealed decades ago.

In another lifetime, standing before a different crowd, under a different accusation, he would have stood silent, chin raised in defiant, solitary pride, letting their hatred wash over him. He would have accepted the role of the villain, because it was easier than explaining the bruises, the humiliations, the feeling of being less than human. He would have let them believe the worst, because the truth was a weapon that had always been turned against him.

But that was another lifetime. In this one, he had a brother who had burned a world for him. In this one, he was the Master Strategist of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect, the Peak Lord of Qing Jing, not a slave who was never once secure in his position. In this one, the beast Luo Binghe was watching, and he would be damned before he let this ghost from a fire they had set together be used to destroy the one person who had never seen him as worthless.

He took a half-step forward, his body positioning itself as a shield.

"A convenient ghost," Shen Jiu's voice cut through the murmurs, sharp enough to draw blood. "Appearing now, to sing a pretty song for her new master." His gaze swept the Huan Hua contingent, a blatant, defiant accusation of his own.

Liu Qingge didn’t understand the history, but he understood loyalty. He saw the way Shen Yuan stood, silent and broken, and the way Shen Jiu vibrated with a rage born of old wounds. Cheng Luan slid an inch from its scabbard, the ring of steel a clear, simple answer to the growing tension. He said nothing. His stance said everything.

(*On a distant peak, Yue Qingyuan received the report. The paper slipped from his fingers. For a long moment, he stared at the distant horizon where Jinlan City lay. Then, his voice, low and devoid of all its usual gentleness, gave an order that would set a thousand swords humming.*

“Move. Now. All of you. To Jinlan’s border.”)

Shen Yuan did not move. He did not speak. His face was a sheet of parchment, blank and bloodless. Inside, his mind was a fortress under siege, walls of logic and strategy crumbling against a tidal wave of pure, undiluted panic. A single, cold thought crystallized: *He found a ghost. He resurrected a corpse to testify against me. The narrative is perfect. He found her. How? We were so careful. We made sure. I made sure.*

His eyes, hollow, found Luo Binghe’s across the square. There was no plea in them, only the frantic, calculating scan of a tactician whose entire battle plan had just been rendered obsolete. *This changes everything. The timeline is shattered. He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't know.*

A new layer of horror settled over him, cold and suffocating. Luo Binghe knew how to walk through dreams. He must have gone into Qiu Haitang’s mind, seen the pristine, curated world she had lived in. He would have seen the edges of it, the shadows in the west wing she was taught not to look at, the flinches she was taught to ignore. He would have seen the truth of their suffering, the justification for the fire, laid bare in the girl’s subconscious.

And he had judged that truth… useful.

The realization was a different kind of poison. Binghe had seen the evidence of their torment, the rot at the heart of the Qiu family that made the fire a necessity, not a crime. And he had

decided that this girl's innocent, fractured perspective—the perspective of the one person who could paint them as monsters without a hint of their own monstrosity—was the more valuable tool. He had seen the abuse, understood its horror, and deemed it an acceptable price to pay for Shen Yuan's ruin. The truth was irrelevant; only the narrative mattered.

(The heat of the fire was at their backs, a beast roaring in triumph. Before them, in the flickering orange light, Qiu Jianluo lay still in the dirt. A-Jiu stood over him, a heavy, blood-slicked rock in his small hands, his chest heaving, his eyes wide with shock. This was the moment. The point of no return. Shen Yuan's own heart hammered against his ribs, a wild, terrified bird. He looked from his brother's frozen form to the main house. He had calculated this. He had prepared for this. Survival demanded totality. There could be no witnesses, no one left to point a finger, to weave a tale of victimhood that would eclipse their crimes. "A-Jiu," his voice was strangely calm, a steady anchor in the storm. He pulled his brother back, away from the body, toward the relative safety of the outer wall. "Wait here." Then he turned, and with a focus born of sheer, desperate terror, he lit the first torch and threw it into the dry tinder he'd prepared days ago. He made sure. He checked the windows, the doors. He made sure everyone was inside. He made sure no one got out. He had tried to burn this exact future to the ground before it could ever take root.)

And he had *failed*. The one person whose testimony would be unassailably, devastatingly pure was the one who had, by some miracle or curse, survived. And now, Luo Binghe had found her.

Across the square, Luo Binghe met his gaze. A faint, cold smile touched the young man's lips, there and gone in an instant. His eyes, dark and unreadable, shifted from Shen Yuan's face to Qiu Haitang, a brief, assessing glance. He did not look shocked. He did not look outraged. He looked… satisfied.

He knows, Shen Yuan thought, the despair curdling into a strange, detached admiration for the ruthlessness of it all. *He knows what I tried to bury, and he has dug it up. He has taken my failsafe and turned it into my execution. This is fate's mockery. I tried to burn the script, and he is simply reading from the ashes.*

Back in the square, the mood had turned. The righteous indignation of the cultivators, once divided, now had a clear, human face to focus on. A grieving sister. A burned home. Huan Hua disciples closed ranks, their hands firm on their sword hilts, their eyes hardening as they

looked upon the silent, motionless figure of Shen Qingchun. The trap, baited with the one ghost he had thought impossible, had finally sprung shut.

Chapter 11: The Water Prison Arc

Chapter Summary

What goes on in the water prison, stays in the water prison.

Chapter Notes

Or where I give inaccurate descriptions to chapters, bc... well you will know shortly.

We have officially entered the plot heavy part of the story. Where nothing makes sense for now. It's super chaotic. It is also so soo fun to write and plot.

Also I updated it a bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The silence in the square shattered like glass.

"Enough!"

The Old Palace Master's voice rang out, dripping with feigned sorrow and righteous authority. He stepped forward, his golden robes seeming to drink the sickly light of the plague-tainted city.

"This tragedy… this web of betrayal… it cuts deeper than any of us feared. A Peak Lord, consorting with demons? The mastermind behind a plague? The butcher of an innocent family?"

He shook his head, a portrait of profound disappointment. "For the sake of justice, and for the safety of all the cultivation world, Shen Qingchun must answer for these crimes. He will be remanded to the custody of Huan Hua Palace for a fair and impartial trial."

It was not a request. It was a pronouncement.

As one, a phalanx of senior Huan Hua disciples moved forward, their hands on their swords, their intent clear.

They did not take a second step.

A blast of pure, aggressive spiritual power erupted, flattening the dust in a perfect circle. Liu Qingge stood before them, Cheng Luan fully drawn and humming with a killing intent so sharp it seemed to bleed the color from the air around it. His eyes were chips of frozen amethyst.

"Try it," he said. The two words were not a challenge, but a promise of annihilation.

A whisper of silk, and Shen Jiu was at his back, Xiu Ya unsheathed and gleaming with a cold, green light. The two Peak Lords, usually at odds, stood as an unbreachable fortress, their combined aura a silent declaration of war. Shen Jiu’s gaze was a physical lash across the faces of the advancing disciples. "You will not lay a hand on him."

The standoff stretched, a bowstring pulled taut. The air crackled with the threat of a battle that would turn the plague city into a charnel house. It was the Old Palace Master who broke it, his voice dripping with false reason.

"Peak Lords Liu, Shen… your loyalty to your martial brother is… admirable. But think! To fight here would be to spill the blood of countless innocents. Is that the legacy Cang Qiong wishes? To be remembered as the sect that chose a single, accused man over the peace of the entire cultivation world?"

Liu Qingge’s sneer was a flash of white teeth. "Step aside."

Shen Jiu’s fan did not waver. "You speak of peace while holding a knife to our throat. Do not insult our intelligence with these theatrics."

Mu Qingfang, who had been silently observing from the edge of the square, stepped forward. He did not address the politics. Instead, his calm, clinical voice dissected the foundation of the accusation itself. "This one has examined the plague's victims," he stated, his gaze sweeping over the assembled cultivators. "The demonic energy present is a crude, volatile catalyst. Shen-shixiong's spiritual signature, by contrast, is one of refined stability and immense complexity, honed through decades of working with volatile ecosystems. They are fundamentally incompatible. The premise that he could have authored this… spiritual poison… is medically and spiritually unsound. You are building your case on a biological impossibility."

The Old Palace Master’s benevolent mask splintered into a sharp, condescending smile. "A fascinating theory, Peak Lord Mu. But theories do not absolve guilt. A master of poisons would surely know how to disguise his own hand. Your 'biological impossibility' is merely a testament to his cunning. Will you truly risk a war," his voice rose, aiming for the crowd, "on the basis of a healer's *hunch*?"

"The war," a new voice rang out, calm and utterly inflexible, "will be of your making, not ours."

All heads turned. From the main thoroughfare, Yue Qingyuan walked forward, not with haste, but with an inexorable finality. He was not alone. Behind him, the distinct colors of Bai Zhan, Wan Jian, and Xian Shu disciples flowed into the square, their formation not a mob, but a deployed army. Their silence was more threatening than any battle cry.

Yue Qingyuan’s gaze swept over the scene, taking in the accused Shen Yuan, the drawn swords of his martial brothers, and the Huan Hua disciples. His face, usually a mask of gentle diplomacy, was carved from stone. There was no anger in his eyes, only a cold, terrifying certainty.

"You will not," Yue Qingyuan said, his voice low but carrying to every corner of the square, "be taking my shidi anywhere."

The trap had been sprung, but the prey had brought its own hunters.

From the Huan Hua ranks, Luo Binghe watched the scene unfold. He saw the unbreachable wall of Cang Qiong's defiance, the way they closed ranks around Shen Yuan without a moment's hesitation. He saw the Sect Leader himself, having mobilized an army, standing as the final, unyielding barrier. A profound stillness settled over him, a stark contrast to the escalating tension. His eyes, dark and intense, were fixed on Shen Yuan with a focus so absolute it felt like a physical touch. There was a tension in his jaw, a slight flaring of his nostrils. To Shen Yuan, it was the look of a strategist watching a flawless plan unravel. The stillness was not shock, but a furious recalculation. The intense focus was not concern, but a cold reassessment of a prize that was being forcefully denied. *He is furious,* Shen Yuan thought. *His perfect narrative is collapsing because we refuse to play our parts. He cannot stand that his control is slipping.*

The Old Palace Master, faced with the full, mobilized might of Cang Qiong, Yue Qingyuan's unwavering resolve, and a healer's testimony that shattered the very logic of his accusation, paled. The cost of taking Shen Yuan by force had just become incalculable.

It was in this stalemate, this breath held before the storm, that Shen Yuan's mind, ever the strategist, found the only path forward. He saw the furious calculation in Luo Binghe's eyes. *This is it. This is the moment the protagonist's patience snaps. If he is denied here, his revenge won't end with me. He will turn his cunning on the entire sect. On A-Jiu. On Liu Qingge. He will orchestrate a tragedy that makes this plague look like a minor inconvenience. The narrative demands a sacrifice. I can either let it be all of them, or I can make it only me.*

His voice was hollow, stripped of all emotion, yet it cut through the silence like a blade.

"Enough."

All eyes turned to him.

"A-Jiu. Liu-shidi. Zhangmen-shixiong." He met each of their gazes, a world of gratitude and bitter apology in his own. "Stand down. Do not give them the excuse."

He then looked directly at the Old Palace Master, his voice flat. "You will have your trial."

He stepped forward, past Liu Qingge's outstretched arm, past the deadly point of Shen Jiu's sword. He walked calmly toward the waiting Huan Hua disciples, his heart a frantic drum against his ribs. *This is for them. This is to keep them safe from what I unleashed when I corrupted the purest sheep and pushed him into hell.*

As the spirit-suppressing cuffs were locked onto his wrists, a sharp, sudden *crack* echoed in the square. All eyes darted to the source. Luo Binghe stood perfectly still, but the decorative jade hairpiece at his brow had fractured cleanly in two. He gestured to wave the noise off. The Huan Hua disciples resumed their flurry of activities. And yet, it felt as he had not moved a muscle. His face was a bloodless mask, his eyes wide and unblinking, fixed on Shen Yuan with an intensity that felt like being physically pinned. A single, perfect drop of blood welled from his temple where the jade hairpin had pierced skin. He didn't seem to notice.

To Shen Yuan, it was the terrifying stillness of a predator whose prey had just done something utterly unpredictable. *He is furious. He wanted to break me himself, to drag me away. This public, political transfer is an insult to his grand design.*

A cold dread, laced with the old, familiar guilt, washed over him. *What have I created? What will he do to me now that I am finally in his grasp?*

He was led away. The last thing he saw was Luo Binghe, a statue of terrifying stillness, his gaze a brand that promised this was not over. But within that burning intensity, beneath the rage Shen Yuan feared, was a flicker of something else—a dark, profound satisfaction.

Good, Shen Yuan thought, as the prison doors closed, swallowing the light, remembering that look of satisfaction on his face. *Let him be obsessed with me. Let all his cunning and his rage focus on breaking one man. That is a price I can pay. It is the only way to keep the rest of them safe.*

The heavy, damp doors of the Huan Hua Water Prison slammed shut behind him, the sound echoing with finality in the profound dark. He had placed himself squarely in the narrative's crosshairs, a lone king offered to save the rest of the board. He was in the lion's den, but with this, he had ensured his sect, his brother, would remain beyond the protagonist’s immediate reach. For now.

The air in the Water Prison was a physical presence, a cold, wet shroud that seeped through robes and into bones. Shen Yuan knelt on the slimy stone, the spirit-suppressing cuffs a leaden weight on his wrists. His meridians, already frayed from the Lingxi Caves, felt like a network of frozen, shattered glass.

The door groaned open. The Huan Hua Palace Mistress swept in, her gilded robes a garish splash of color in the gloom.

"Still so proud, Peak Lord Shen?" she cooed, her whip—a viper-like thing glowing with sickly green light—coiling at her side. "Let's see if we can't make you sing a more humble tune for our honored guest. Luo-gongzi needs to see the price of betrayal."

She's doing this to curry favor, Shen Yuan realized through the gathering haze of pain. *She thinks if she brutalizes me, it will please him. That it will prove her loyalty.*

The first strike was a line of fire across his shoulders, the venomous spiritual energy burrowing into his damaged core. He gritted his teeth, his body bowing, but he made no sound.

"He's stubborn," the Palace Mistress chirped to the empty air, as if reporting to an unseen audience. "But don't you worry, we'll break him. He'll be a fitting welcome gift."

She laid on another strike, and another. Shen Yuan lost himself in the pain, his world narrowing to the cold stone and the searing lines of agony. His robes were torn, clinging with blood and water. A violent, uncontrollable shiver wracked his frame.

The door, left slightly ajar by the Palace Mistress in her dramatic entrance, was suddenly thrown open with a force that slammed it against the wall.

Luo Binghe stood there, frozen on the threshold. He had not been summoned. He had not come to supervise. He had simply… arrived.

His eyes, wide and unblinking, took in the scene: the Palace Mistress with her whip raised, the stark, bloody lines across Shen Yuan's back, the way he shuddered on the cold stone. For a single, suspended moment, there was no expression on his face at all. It was a perfect, terrifying blank.

Then, the world snapped back into motion.

"Enough." The word was low, but it cracked through the air like a whip itself, vibrating with a pressure that made the torches gutter.

The Palace Mistress flinched, her arm freezing mid-swing. She spun around, her simpering smile instantly plastered back on her face. "Luo-gongzi! You're here! I was just—"

"Get out." The command was flat, absolute. It wasn't a request. It was an expulsion. A flicker of something dark and chaotic seemed to shiver in the air around him, a palpable threat that had nothing to do with his words.

The smile melted from her face, replaced by confusion and a flicker of fear. "But… I was only…"

Luo Binghe’s gaze, which had been fixed on Shen Yuan’s bleeding back, slowly slid to her. There was no anger in it. Only a cold, dead stillness that was infinitely more frightening. He did not repeat himself.

With a hurried, flustered bow, the Palace Mistress scurried out, the door swinging shut behind her and plunging the cell back into a heavy, charged silence.

Now alone, Luo Binghe’s rigid posture seemed to deflate by a fraction. His eyes swept over Shen Yuan again, and this time, the blankness was replaced by something raw and

tumultuous. His hands, clenched at his sides, trembled. He took a single, jerky step forward, then stopped, as if an invisible barrier prevented him from getting closer. The air hummed with the dissonant whisper of a sword not yet drawn.

Then, in one abrupt, almost violent motion, he shrugged off his own heavy, embroidered outer robe. The fabric whispered as it fell from his shoulders. He took two stiff steps forward, his movements unnatural, like a puppet on tangled strings. He leaned down, his intent clear—to drape the robe over Shen Yuan's shivering, exposed back.

No. The false kindness. The prelude to worse. Revulsion, cold and sharp, cut through Shen Yuan's pain. He flinched back, a full-body recoil, turning his face away to the damp wall.

The motion halted Luo Binghe completely. For a heartbeat, there was only the sound of their breathing. Then, a strange, choked sound escaped Luo Binghe's throat—not a word, but a stifled, guttural noise. The robe wasn't placed; it was *dropped*. It landed in a heap on the filthy stone beside Shen Yuan, as if the act of holding it had become unbearable.

When Shen Yuan risked a glance back, Luo Binghe was staring at the discarded robe, his head cocked at a slight, unnatural angle. A faint, tremulous smile touched his lips, there and gone in an instant. "So... it's like that," he murmured, the words slurred and low, as if speaking to himself. He didn't look at Shen Yuan again. He turned and left, his exit unnervingly silent, the door clicking shut with a soft, final sound.

The next time, Shen Yuan was drifting in a feverish haze, thirst a raw ache in his throat. The door opened without a sound. Luo Binghe was just *there*, holding a cup of pale jade. The water within steamed faintly, infused with pure, clean energy.

He didn't kneel. He loomed, his shadow falling over Shen Yuan. His eyes were wide, the pupils dark and blown, fixed on Shen Yuan's face with an unnerving, unblinking intensity. A faint, almost imperceptible tremor ran through the hand holding the cup.

He's waiting. He wants to see me break. To see me drink whatever he's poisoned it with.

As the cup neared his lips, Shen Yuan summoned the last of his strength and jerked his head away. The cup flew from Luo Binghe's grasp, shattering against the wall. The clean water darkened the slimy stones.

Luo Binghe didn't move. He stared at the shattered jade, his breathing hitching. A low hum began to fill the cell, emanating from him—the dissonant whisper of Xin Mo.

"Broken," he said, his voice a hollow echo. He looked from the shards to Shen Yuan, his head tilting again. "Everything breaks. You break it." He took a sudden, lurching step closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper that was far more terrifying than a shout. "Or do I break it? It's so hard to tell. The threads are all... tangled."

The dark energy around him pulsed, a visible ripple of purple-black. He laughed, a short, sharp sound with no humor in it. "It doesn't matter. I'll get you another. I'll get you a thousand." He stared at his own trembling hand, his expression one of distant curiosity. "They'll all be perfect. You'll see."

He left then, moving with that same disjointed silence, leaving Shen Yuan alone with the echo of his broken words and the chilling certainty that the boy he'd pushed into the Abyss had not just gained power, but had shattered alongside his own mind.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

The third time, Shen Yuan was barely conscious, the cold a permanent resident in his bones. Luo Binghe didn't enter so much as he filled the doorway, a blanket of thick wool clutched in his hands. His eyes were wild, the veins around them dark against his pale skin. The hum of Xin Mo was a constant, oppressive background noise.

He didn't speak. He moved forward with a stiff, predatory gait and threw the blanket over Shen Yuan, not to cover him gently, but to *smother* him with it.

A final, feeble spark of defiance made Shen Yuan struggle weakly against the heavy, suffocating weight.

The reaction was instantaneous.

Luo Binghe let out a raw, wounded sound, halfway between a snarl and a sob. He shoved down hard, pinning Shen Yuan completely, his hands gripping his shoulders through the wool, fingers digging in like claws. His face was inches away, his breath hot and frantic.

"Why won't you just TAKE it?!" he screamed, spittle flying, his voice cracking with a strain that was purely, terrifyingly mental. The dark energy swirled around him like a malevolent storm. "I bring you warmth! I bring you water! I bring you everything! And you... you just... *shatter* it! You look at me like I'm a monster!"

He shook Shen Yuan, not hard, but with a desperate, frantic energy. "Am I? AM I A MONSTER, SHEN-SHIBO? Is that what you made me? Is that why you pushed me? To make *this*?!"

He released one hand from Shen Yuan's shoulder to claw at his own chest, where Xin Mo resided. "It talks to me, you know. It screams. It says you deserve to be hurt. It says I should make you scream like I screamed. But I don't want to! I just want... I just want..."

His words dissolved into incoherent, ragged breaths. He stared down at Shen Yuan, his eyes wide and lost. "Is this the only way you would look at me?" he whispered, the rage suddenly bleeding into a devastating, plaintive confusion. "To see me as one of the monsters you keep on your peak? The dangerous, pretty things you so adore? The ones you find so... fascinating?" A broken, horrible imitation of a smile twisted his lips. "Is that what I had to become for you to finally *see* me?"

The words, raw and laced with a pain that felt ancient, finally pierced through Shen Yuan's own terror. He saw it then, beyond the screaming fury and the chaotic energy—the spiritual corruption eating away at Luo Binghe's sanity. This wasn't just anger. This was possession. Xin Mo was in the driver's seat, twisting a deep, festering wound into a weapon, using Luo Binghe's own heart as a lever to break him.

He's not in control, Shen Yuan realized with a jolt. *The sword is. It's feeding on his... his what? His grief? His betrayal?* The thought was dizzying. *It needs to be sated. It demands violence or...*

The memory of PIDW surfaced, stark and clinical. Xin Mo was sated through bloodshed or dual cultivation. A harem of thousands. An endless cycle of consumption. Luo Binghe couldn't very well go on a rampage here in Huan Hua Palace, not without destroying his carefully constructed position. Which left the other option. The one he had used so prolifically in the novel. Of course. That explained the intensity, the possessiveness. Xin Mo was pushing him towards that, twisting his actions into a grotesque parody of care, trying to force a connection that would feed it. It was using Luo Binghe's own desperate, misunderstood feelings as a gateway.

He had to say something. He had to break this cycle before the sword fully consumed the person he had tried—but never hard enough for his efforts to truly matter ~~(after all A-Jiu was safe, perhaps if he had just sacri…)~~ — to save from a worse fate.

"Binghe," Shen Yuan rasped, his voice a dry, cracked thing. He forced himself to meet those wild, desperate eyes. "The sword... Xin Mo... you have to sate it. It's corrupting you. It will consume you if you don't."

Luo Binghe stilled, his frantic breathing halting. For a moment, there was only the hum of the demonic blade. "Sate it?" he repeated, the words a low, dangerous whisper. His gaze intensified, burning with a new, terrifying kind of focus. "How, Shizun? How do I sate it?" He leaned closer, his voice dropping to an intimate, conspiratorial tone that made Shen Yuan's skin crawl.

"It whispers about... connections. About claiming. About making what is desired... *mine*."

His hand, which had been gripping Shen Yuan's shoulder, loosened its claw-like hold and instead began to stroke the side of his neck through the rough blanket, a slow, possessive caress that was utterly alien and deeply wrong. "It has so many ideas, Shizun. Terrible, wonderful ideas. It says this is the only way to make you understand. The only way to make you... stay."

Shen Yuan recoiled internally, his theory confirmed with horrifying clarity. *It's pushing him towards dual cultivation with him.* The solution was obvious, a standard piece of PIDW lore. Xin Mo demanded a specific, intense form of spiritual release to be sated, and its host was clearly being driven towards that outlet. The intense focus, the possessive gestures—it was the sword's influence, magnifying Luo Binghe's base instincts and directing them toward the most readily available target: himself.

Of course it's fixated on me right now, Shen Yuan reasoned, his mind latching onto the logic with desperate relief. *I'm the one in front of him, the source of his current emotional turmoil. The sword is opportunistic; it's using this high-tension situation to fuel its demands.* It had nothing to do with *him*, Shen Yuan, personally. It was simple proximity and spiritual mechanics.

He had to redirect this. For Luo Binghe's own sake, before the sword fully eroded his sanity.

"Binghe, I know it’s whispering things but you know how to sate it," he said, his tone deliberately matter-of-fact, as if discussing the care of a spiritual beast. "The method is well-documented. There are countless cultivators—disciples, courtesans—who would be... enthusiastic participants." He was trying to be helpful, to point him toward the vast, willing harem that was his canonical birthright. "You don't have to... to force anything here. That path only leads to further spiritual damage. Go. Find a more suitable partner. Sate the sword's hunger properly."

For a heartbeat, there was silence. Then, Luo Binghe let out a sound—a low, guttural thing that was ripped from deep in his chest, utterly devoid of humor. It was the sound of something breaking.

"*Enthusiastic participants*?" he repeated, his voice a distorted, mocking echo. The blankness on his face shattered into a rictus of pure, unhinged fury. The dark energy of Xin Mo flared around him, violent and seething. "You would send me away? To *strangers*? After everything?!"

He surged forward, not to touch Shen Yuan, but to slam his fist into the wet stone wall beside his head. The impact was thunderous, spraying fragments of rock.

"The sword doesn't want *them*!" he roared, his eyes blazing with a chaotic fire. "It has *taste*, Shibo! It whispers that nothing else will *ever* be enough! It says the only thing that can possibly fill this void is the one who created it!"

He leaned in, his breath hot against Shen Yuan's face, his voice dropping to a venomous, trembling whisper. "So you can take your *suitable partners* and your *clinical solutions* and you can watch them turn to ash. Because I am not going anywhere."

He pushed back from the wall, his chest heaving, staring at Shen Yuan as if he were a puzzle he intended to solve by breaking it into ever-smaller pieces. "You are going to stay right here," he hissed. "And you are going to understand."

In his agitated state, as he gestured wildly, his hand caught on the torn fabric of Shen Yuan's already ruined robes. There was a sharp *rip*. A swath of silk tore away from the shoulder, baring pale, cold skin and the stark, bloody lines of the whip marks against it.

Both of them froze.

Luo Binghe’s breath hitched audibly. The furious, heaving rhythm of his chest stilled. His eyes, which had been blazing with chaotic fire, locked onto the exposed skin. The wild anger seemed to drain from his face, leaving behind a stark, unnerving intensity. His gaze wasn't one of horror or disgust; it was a fixed, almost predatory focus, tracing the line of Shen Yuan's collarbone and the marred flesh with a look so deep it felt physical. The faint, discordant hum of the demonic sword, which had been a constant snarl, shifted, deepening into a low, resonant thrum that seemed to vibrate in the very stones.

Shen Yuan instinctively shrank back, the intensity of that stare more alarming than the previous rage. *He’s shocked,* he thought, a flush of shame warming his own cheeks. *The sight is too undignified, even for his revenge. He’s appalled.*

The spell broke. Luo Binghe’s eyes snapped up to meet his, and for a fraction of a second, they were wide, almost startled, before his expression shuttered closed. With a jerky, frantic movement, he ripped his own heavy outer cloak from his shoulders and all but threw it over Shen Yuan. The fabric landed with a weighty thud, engulfing him, its coarse texture a stark contrast to the ruined silk. The action was so abrupt it was almost an attack.

"Don't—" Luo Binghe choked out, the word cutting off as if he'd bitten his tongue. He didn't finish. He stared at Shen Yuan, now buried in the dark fabric, his jaw working soundlessly.

Then, he spun around so fast his robes whipped through the damp air, and he was gone, the door slamming shut with a force that shook the walls.

Shen Yuan sat amidst the settling dust, the heavy cloak smelling faintly of sandalwood and the ozone-tang of demonic energy. He pulled the garment tighter. *He was ashamed,* he reaffirmed to himself, the frantic flight and aborted command seeming to confirm it. *Ashamed of his own lack of control, or of seeing a former teacher so degraded?*

His mind, ever analytical, circled back to Luo Binghe's words. *'The sword doesn't want them. It has taste.'*

A strange, unsettled feeling curled in Shen Yuan's gut. He had assumed the sword's "taste" was a generic hunger for power. But the vehemence of the rejection, the sheer personal offense at the suggestion of other partners… it wasn't generic. It was specific.

Who, then? Shen Yuan wondered, genuinely perplexed. *Who does the sword—or does Binghe himself—deem uniquely suitable for such a… a specific hunger?* He ran through a mental list of powerful female cultivators and demonesses from the original plot. None fit the sheer, personal intensity of that reaction.

He ran through the list. The Huan Hua Palace Mistress? The thought was almost laughable. She was a simpering fool, drawn to power and prestige. Her affections were shallow, a performance. She would only stoke his vanity, not anchor his soul. Ning Yingying? She was kind, but a child in spirit. She loved the idea of the gentle A-Luo she remembered; the reality of the Demon Sovereign would terrify her. Her fragility would be a burden, not a solace. Sha Hualing? All ambition and predatory glee. She would partner with the darkness in him, yes, but only to further her own ends. She'd encourage the worst of Xin Mo's impulses, seeing his power as a weapon to wield, not a sickness to manage.

His thoughts lingered longest on Liu Mingyan. There was potential there. As the Veiled Jade, she was a figure of both righteousness and formidable strength. More importantly, in the original tale, she had allied with Luo Binghe, recognizing the darkness in him but channeling it towards a shared goal: revenge for her brother. Her loyalty, once given, would be unshakable.

But that was the very reason she was ultimately unsuitable. Liu Mingyan's virtue, while real, was a structured, cultivated thing, born of privilege and a clear moral code. She understood vengeance, yes, but she understood it as a righteous duty, a final, tragic act in a hero's story. She could walk beside his darkness, but she could never truly comprehend the formless, bottomless *void* that the Abyss created—the raw, screaming *why* that had no answer in any code of honor. Her understanding would be intellectual, a noblewoman's sympathy for a feral dog. It would never be the visceral, shared understanding of another creature who had also been broken on the same wheel. She would try to fit his chaos into her framework of chivalric tragedy, and in doing so, she would fundamentally fail to see *him*.

Frustration prickled at him. None of them were *right*. They were either too shallow, too fragile, too selfish, or their understanding was too pristine, too theoretical. They didn't see the whole, fractured picture. They wouldn't offer the deep, wordless comprehension that came from having inhabited a similar darkness. They would, each in their own way, fail him.

This was a critical variable, a hidden piece of the plot he had somehow missed. Who was this person who could possibly meet such impossible, specific criteria?
Understanding *who* Binghe truly desired was the key to predicting his next move. For now, it remained a blank space in his calculations, a question mark that left him dangerously exposed. He pulled the cloak tighter, the puzzle of this unknown, impossibly perfect figure as much a prison as the cold, damp walls around him.

The air in the Water Prison was thick with the scent of damp stone and despair when the lock on the heavy door clicked open with a soft, precise sound. A figure slipped inside, his movements fluid and silent.

Shen Yuan looked up, weary and expecting another confrontation. Instead, he saw the Huan Hua head disciple, Gongyi Xiao, standing in the dim light. The young man's eyes swept over the scene: the torn robes, the bloody welts visible beneath the fabric, and the heavy, ornate cloak that was clearly Luo Binghe's, draped over Shen Yuan's shivering form.

Gongyi Xiao’s face, usually a picture of disciplined neutrality, was set in lines of cold disapproval. His jaw was tight, his gaze sharp as it took in the evidence of mistreatment and the possessive implication of the cloak. He had seen Luo Binghe storm out of here not long ago, his expression a thundercloud of frustrated, dark intensity. The pieces assembled themselves in his mind into a clear, damning narrative.

"Peak Lord Shen," Gongyi Xiao stated, his voice low and devoid of its usual respectful warmth. It was the tone of a man stating an irrefutable fact. "This situation is untenable. A Peak Lord of Cang Qiong does not belong in a Huan Hua dungeon on baseless charges, subject to... this." A faint, barely perceptible gesture encompassed Shen Yuan's disheveled state and the cloak. "Luo Binghe's conduct is a disgrace. My sect's complicity in it is a failure of justice."

Shen Yuan tried to form a question, to understand this sudden, stern intervention, but a wave of dizziness washed over him. The combination of spiritual depletion, pain, and the sheer cognitive whiplash of the last few days was too much. The world swam before his eyes, Gongyi Xiao’s stern face blurring into the torchlight.

"I am removing you from this injustice," Gongyi Xiao said, his voice the last clear thing Shen Yuan heard before his consciousness fled, plunging him into a silent, welcoming darkness.

The silence in the Grand Reception Hall of Huan Hua Palace was a taut bowstring, waiting for the arrow. The Old Palace Master did not simply stand before the assembled sect leaders; he seemed to draw the very light in the room towards himself, his golden robes a beacon of grim authority.

He did not speak. He let the scrying bowl do the work.

The image shimmered in the air above the sacred water: the dank, empty cell. The broken spirit-suppressing cuffs lay in the filth like discarded snake skins. And hanging in the air, visible even through the scrying magic, was a faint, shimmering residue—a venomous, royal purple haze that pulsed with a malevolent life of its own. It was not the chaotic stain of a lesser demon. This was a signature. A brand.

"The stench of betrayal is in the air you breathe," the Old Palace Master's voice cut through the silence, low and resonant, each word a hammer blow. He pointed a single, trembling finger at the image. "Look upon the proof! This is not the work of some mindless beast! This is the mark of a High Level Demon! Perhaps even one with a title of a Saint or a Lord! And it was left in the cell of the man we were told was a victim!"

He swept his gaze across the stunned faces, his eyes blazing with a feigned, righteous fire. "Shen Qingchun was never a prisoner! He was a plant! A viper we welcomed into our midst! He orchestrated the plague at Jinlan City to test his poisons! He manipulated the Qiu family's tragic end to conceal his own demonic alliance! And now, when his facade was crumbling, his true allies have come for him! He has not escaped justice! He has been extracted by the very masters he has served all along!"

As he spoke, his thumb rubbed absently against the flawless jade ring on his finger, a habitual gesture of agitation he would never allow in a less controlled moment. The sight of the empty cell, the undeniable demonic signature—it was all so perfectly damning. And so deeply, personally satisfying.

A memory surfaced, unbidden: Shen Qingchun standing in this very hall months ago, after a different conference. The Old Palace Master had gestured to the legendary Sun-Swallow Carp swimming in the central pond, a treasure of Huan Hua. "A magnificent specimen, is it not? We have texts on its care dating back a thousand years. A mind like yours, Shen-shizi, would find unparalleled resources here."

Shen Qingchun had glanced at the fish, then back at him, his expression not one of awe, but of mild, academic interest. "Its scales indicate a slight mineral deficiency in the water. A common issue with captive specimens. Ling You's texts suggest a specific moss from the Western Crags can rectify it."

He had not been impressed. He had offered a correction. A slight, almost imperceptible tightening had traveled up the Old Palace Master's spine that day, a cold knot of offense that

had never quite loosened. The man had been offered a golden opportunity, and he had treated it as a scholarly debate.

What galled him more, what had festered, was the way the other Cang Qiong lords orbited Shen Qingchun. The way the Bai Zhan brute, who respected no one, would still his bluster with a single look from the scholar. The way the Qing Jing viper, who trusted no one, would follow his lead without question. The way even the Sect Leader, Yue Qingyuan, deferred to his judgment on matters of the natural world. He commanded that absolute, unearned loyalty without ever seeming to try, without the decades of political maneuvering and patronage the Old Palace Master had meticulously built. It was an insult to the very nature of power.

Now, looking at the evidence of Shen Qingchun's alleged demonic allegiance, that old, cold knot warmed with a sense of vindication. Of course he had refused Huan Hua's patronage. His loyalties had always lain elsewhere. With darker, more chaotic masters who would not question his impertinence. He had not been humble; he had been arrogant. He had not been content; he had been biding his time.

He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a venomous, conspiratorial whisper that somehow carried to every corner.

"He did not just flee. He spat in our faces. He left this… this calling card to mock us! To show us how deeply his kind has infiltrated our world! He and his demon lord are laughing at us right now!"

That was the spark. The murmurs erupted into shouts of fury. Swords were half-drawn with a deafening chorus of ringing steel. The air grew thick with killing intent, so potent it made the torches flicker.

"The Ling You Peak Lord is a demonic spy!"

"He must be eradicated!"

"War! We must purge this filth from the world!"

The Old Palace Master straightened, his face a mask of grim satisfaction. He allowed himself a single, slow breath, the tension in his shoulders easing for the first time in days. The narrative was no longer just sealed; it was a blazing pyre, and he had just thrown Shen Qingchun onto it. The hunt was no longer a duty; it was a holy crusade, and the righteous fury of the cultivation world was his to command. Let Cang Qiong Mountain see their beloved, respected scholar burn.

Let them learn what true power looked like.

The air in the opulent chamber was suddenly, profoundly still. The servant who had delivered the report stood frozen, the words "demonic energy" and "disappearance" still hanging in the air like a death sentence.

Luo Binghe did not move. Then, a single, fine crack appeared in the surface of the heavy sandalwood table beside him. It spiderwebbed outwards in an instant, a silent, intricate map of fracture, before the entire structure imploded into a pile of splinters and dust. The sound was not loud, but final. A puff of fragrant wood-powder bloomed in the lamplight.

He stood amidst the wreckage, his back to the servant. His shoulders were rigid. A low, wet, guttural sound bubbled from his chest, the kind of noise a mortally wounded animal makes when it’s trying to understand the wound.

He is gone. He would choose anything—demons, the wilds, death—over me. The thought was a shard of glass in his soul. Xin Mo whispered, *See? He flees you. Your very existence is his torment.*

His head tilted, a slow, unnatural motion. His eyes, when they turned towards the cowering servant, were not filled with rage, but with a terrifying, bottomless void. The lamplight seemed to die in them.

"Find him." The words were a dry rasp. He took a single, smooth step forward. "Find the ones who took what is mine." A faint, ghastly smile touched his lips, there and gone. "They will have left a trail. Follow it."

He leaned closer, his voice dropping to an intimate, conspiratorial whisper that froze the blood. "Bring him to me. Unharmed." His gaze grew distant, fixed on a vision only he could see. "He requires a new residence. A secure location. A place where he can be... protected. Where outside influences cannot sway him. Where he will finally understand that he has nowhere else to go."

The servant fled, sobbing in sheer, mindless terror.

Alone, Luo Binghe looked at his hand, flexing his fingers. The shadows in the room seemed to deepen, to cling to him. The possessive fear was a cold fire. He would find him. He would bring him here, never to leave again.

On Qiong Ding Peak, the silence was a physical weight, crushing the air from the lungs. Shen Jiu listened to the report, his fan a pale sliver of bone in his hand. The disciple’s voice faltered on the words “demonic energy.”

A memory, not of the Qiu estate, but of a different kind of fire: *Himself, perhaps ten years old, curled on a pile of rags in a stinking alley, shaking with a fever that felt like it would burn him to ash. He had given up. The world was cold, and he was tired. Then, a warmth. Shen Yuan, barely older but seemingly ancient, had pressed against his back, his own small, frail body a shield against the chill. "I'll take the cold, A-Jiu," his brother's voice, already too calm, too logical, had whispered. "You keep the warmth. It's more efficient that way." It was not the first time he had offered to carry his suffering. Not out of pity, but out of a simple, devastating well of his love.*

The fan in his hand did not snap. It closed. The *click* was the sound of a final, irrevocable lock sliding home. The one person who had ever seen his broken pieces not as flaws, but as

parts of a system to be managed and protected, (to be grown so that they could bloom), was gone. The single, stable variable in his chaotic universe had been erased.

"He lies," Shen Jiu said, his voice devoid of all heat, a frozen wasteland. His eyes, burning with a cold that could extinguish stars, met Yue Qingyuan's. "The gilded snake lies, and the feral beast has him." He turned his gaze to the assembled Peak Lords, his expression a polished mask of murderous intent. "They have taken the architect of our defenses. The one who understands the poisons in our soil and the moods of our guardian beasts. They have stolen *him*."

He paused, letting the tactical implication hang in the air, far more effective than any emotional appeal.

"Here is what we will do," Shen Jiu continued, his tone that of a man discussing the pruning of blighted branches. "Wei Qingwei. You will forge nothing new. Take every spiritual sword from the Armory Vaults, every last one, and shatter them. Use the shards to create a storm of flying blades. Let it scour the approaches to Huan Hua Palace. Their golden walls will be pitted to dust."

A collective, sharp intake of breath. To destroy their own sacred weapons was heresy. Wei Qingwei’s face paled, but he gave a single, grim nod.

"Shang Qinghua. You will open the treasury. Not for funds. You will bribe every bandit lord, every mercenary company, every debt-ridden minor clan between here and the demon realm. Their orders are simple: chaos. Burn their supply caravans. Poison their wells. I don't care if they use dung and rotten meat. Huan Hua will drown in filth."

Shang Qinghua, who usually flinched at such things, merely pulled out a ledger and began scribbling, his face set.

"Liu Qingge. You will not hunt. You will be the anvil. You will take Bai Zhan and position yourselves here," he pointed to a map, a narrow pass leading into Huan Hua territory. "You will not move. You will not advance. You will stand, and you will kill anything that tries to get through. Let their armies break against you."

Liu Qingge, who lived for the hunt, merely grunted, his eyes fixed on the choke point, already calculating the slaughter.

"Qi Qingqi. Your disciples will spread the most vile, salacious rumors about the Old Palace Master you can conceive. I want him a laughingstock in every brothel and tavern from here to the coast. Destroy his reputation. Let his own people question him."

Qi Qingqi’s lips curled into a vicious smile. "With pleasure."

He finally looked back at Yue Qingyuan. "And you, Zhangmen-shixiong. You will take Qiong Ding's full might and you will lay siege to their front gate. Not to breach it. To be a distraction. A beautiful, golden target while the rest of us bleed them dry from the shadows."

Yue Qingyuan looked at the man Shen Jiu had become—this cold, brilliant engine of destruction—and saw only the boy, terrified for his brother’s declining health. There was no discussion. No protest.

"See it done," Yue Qingyuan said, his voice the calm at the eye of the hurricane.

The plan was monstrous. It was wasteful, heretical, and would cripple Cang Qiong's resources for a generation. It was a strategy of absolute, scorched-earth vengeance. The strategy Shen Jiu laid out was an abomination. It was a blade aimed at their own throat, a guarantee of generational poverty and spiritual decay. It was the kind of plan that would see their names cursed in the annals of history.

No one objected.

Wei Qingwei, Lord of Wan Jian Peak, did not protest the desecration of his life's work. Instead, he simply turned and strode from the hall, his face a grim slab of stone, already mentally cataloguing which sacred blade to shatter first to create the most effective shrapnel.

Shang Qinghua, clutching his ledgers, did not squeak about the cost. He began muttering under his breath, not about budgets, but about tributaries and watersheds, his eyes glazing over as he calculated how to most efficiently poison a river system.

Liu Qingge was not pacing with restless energy. He stood like a monument already erected, his gaze fixed on the map, his fingers twitching as if they could already feel the impact of Huan Hua's finest breaking against the unyielding wall of him and his disciples.

Not a single protest. No questions, no appeals for moderation.

As Shen Jiu laid out his final, chilling directive, Qi Qingqi’s hand did not fly to her mouth in shock. A slow, dark smile spread across her lips instead, and she immediately leaned over to whisper to her head disciple, whose eyes widened, then narrowed with a predatory gleam.

A look, sharp and silent, passed between the Peak Lords. It was not a look from their present ranks, but a ghost from their youth—a memory of the quiet disciple who had always been their Gardener. They had seen him, as teenagers, take a patch of earth blighted by a vengeful earth-spirit, a place where even crows refused to land, and within a month, cultivate a grove of whispering, bone-white trees that sang a lullaby so potent it could put a rampaging Yao beast to sleep. They had watched him feed a patch of demon-tainted nettles with his own spiritual energy until they mutated into vines of living shadow that strangled spectral invaders. He understood that life was not a gentle force; it was a patient, relentless conqueror that could digest poison and thrive on catastrophe.

And yet they also remembered the same hands, the hands that bred such terrifying flora had been the ones to quietly leave a pot of moon-blessed chamomile on the windowsill of a disciple suffering from chronic nightmares. He was the one who could identify the one non-poisonous mushroom in a deadly cluster when they were lost and starving on a night hunt. He was the calm, certain voice explaining that the monstrous cave-dweller they faced was just a mother protecting her young, offering a path of retreat that saved their lives.

He was the boy who saw the world as a system of terrifying, beautiful, and implausible connections, and he had always used that knowledge to shelter them. The terrifying and the comforting were two roots of the same strange, magnificent tree.

So they did not baulk at this plan to salt the earth. They had decided long ago, in their disciple days, to love the whole impossible, frightening package of him. They were not merely obeying Shen Jiu's cold fury. They were salting the earth, poisoning the wells, and shattering their own foundations, all with a terrifying, shared conviction. When their Gardener was brought back—*when*, the word was a stone in each of their minds—he would not see a wasteland. He would see a field readied with fire, poison and ruin. He would open his seed pouches and unroll his grafting charts, and he would show them how to cultivate a paradise from the very poison they had sown. They trusted that when he was brought back, he would look upon the desolation they had wrought, see the potential in the scorched earth, and know exactly what miraculous, terrifying thing to plant there next.

Chapter End Notes

How the fuck is there a demonic influence you ask? Only god knows bc it sure as hell isn't revealed in this chapter.

Soo... what do you think happened?

And also, where is Shen Yuan?

Chapter 12: The End of an Era

Chapter Summary

The Disaster has struck. What is left is the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Ok so, am not sure how I feel abt this chapter; it's unedited, its raw, and also quite possibly the worst piece of literature I have ever written, so I won't be able to take criticism particularly well for this chapter. I know it might come off as a complete mess, but please, please remember your girl has a fragile heart, and I live for the emotions, and.. There was just so much plot that needed to be plotted. And this was the best I could come up with. I put a lot of thought into this and since all of us are different, it's completely natural for you and I to have different ideas for a satisfactory plot.. so..
Feel free to ask me questions about things which are unclear, bc everything is out in the open now. No, I don't think I could have done better than this atp.

Thanks for sticking with this story and reading, your love motivated me a lot, and as I once said, this was never a story focussed on LuoShen had SY been the older brother of SJ, it was always abt how ppl are and how reality worked. It was never a love story, it was an ode to ppl and their intrinsic nature in the horror that is their world.
How sometimes everything seems to fall apart, and how it is upto them to hold onto what was important. It was always about what you CHOSE when the time came despite what Fate wanted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The air in Shang Qinghua’s office was thick with the scent of ink, sweat, and pure, undiluted panic. Scrolls and ledgers covered every surface, a chaotic fortress of bureaucracy. In the center of it all, Shang Qinghua looked like a man who had personally offended the heavens and was now awaiting the lightning strike. The order had been given. And their plans started with him.

“I can’t,” he whimpered to the empty room, clutching a sheaf of invoices to his chest like a shield. “This is insane! The market destabilization protocols alone could trigger a regional depression! Cucumber-bro, where are you? You’re the one who’s good under pressure!”

His words echoed in the silence, unanswered. The reality crashed down on him again. Shen Yuan wasn't here. Shen Yuan was *gone*.

A memory surfaced painfully sharp in its stark clarity:

He was hunched over his desk years ago, drowning in the kind of bureaucratic minutiae that would make a lesser man weep. A shadow fell over his paperwork. He looked up, ready to snap, and saw Shen Yuan standing there, holding two cups of tea.

“You look like you’re trying to solve the world’s problems through sheer force of glaring,” Shen Yuan had said, his tone dry but not unkind. He set one cup down on a rare clear spot on the desk. “Drink. It’s that caffeinated swamp-water you like from the eastern markets.”

Shang Qinghua had blinked, stunned. “You… you remembered?”

Shen Yuan had snorted, taking a sip of his own, far more refined tea. “Hard to forget the scent of a beverage that could strip varnish.”

Just then, a junior An-Ding disciple had rushed in, nearly tripping over a stack of scrolls.

"Shizun! The manifests for the Spirit Stone shipment from the Western Mines are all wrong! The weights don't match the invoices, the spiritual resonance logs are inverted, and the customs seals from the Zhao Valley are—!"

Shang Qinghua had let out a wordless wail of despair, his head hitting the desk with a thud. "I'm doomed! The Sect Leader will have my head! This is impossible!"

Shen Yuan had sighed, a long-suffering sound. He set his own tea down with a definitive click.

"Stop being a coward," he said, his voice firm. "You built this shitty system, Airplane. Now make it work for us."

And he hadn't left. He'd shrugged off his own elegant outer robe, tossed it over a chair, and pushed his sleeves up to his elbows. He'd commandeered half the desk, snatching an ink brush to twist his hair up into a messy bun, a look of intense focus settling on his face. "The discrepancy isn't in the transport weight. It's in the baseline spiritual density. The Western Mine's primary vein intersects with a dormant ley line. The seasonal spring thaw causes a minor flux…"

For the next shichen, they worked side-by-side in a state of comfortable, modern indecency that would have given any passing Peak Lord a conniption. Robes discarded, hair a mess, sleeves rolled up, they were a whirlwind of scattered scrolls, frantic calculations, and sharp, efficient banter.

"The Zhao Valley seals, you idiot, they use a different calibration—!"

"I know! I'm recalibrating the conversion matrix now, just hold on!"

"Your abacus technique is an affront to mathematics."

"Says the man who just smudged three columns of data!"

It was a frantic, messy, and deeply familiar dance. Shen Yuan didn't solve it for him; he solved it with him, his sharp mind perfectly complementing Shang Qinghua's intricate knowledge of the system's convoluted rules. By the end, the crisis was averted, and they were both leaning back in their chairs, exhausted, ink-stained, and lucky no one had seen the two esteemed Peak Lords looking so disgracefully, wonderfully unkempt.

The memory was a physical ache. Cucumber-bro had always been like that—a sarcastic, sharp-tongued anchor in the storm of this shitty world he'd created. The only one who knew the whole, miserable truth. The only one who would roll up his sleeves, get his hands dirty, and see a job through with him, no matter how messy it got.

Now, that anchor was gone. The storm was here, and Shen Jiu's plan was a hurricane of vengeance that demanded Shang Qinghua be its eye alone.

He looked at the massive map of trade routes, his hands trembling. "The 'unprecedented spirit beast migration,'" he muttered to himself, tears of frustration and fear pricking his eyes. "He'd know the exact migratory pattern. He'd calculate the spiritual dampness coefficient down to the last decimal. He'd make it *perfect*."

He was a hack. A fraud.

"He'd tell me to stop being a coward," Shang Qinghua whispered, a sob catching in his throat. The remembered words were a lifeline. *You built this shitty system, Airplane. Now make it work for us.*

He had already tried everything else. Swallowing his terror, he had ventured into the Northern Desert, his knees knocking together as he stood before the towering, icy form of Mobei-Jun.

"My king," he'd squeaked, bowing so low his forehead nearly scraped the frozen ground. "This... this humble one seeks information. About the Ling You Peak Lord, Shen Qingchun. His disappearance... do you know...?"

Mobei-Jun had looked down at him, his blue eyes like chips of glacial ice. The silence stretched, so cold and heavy Shang Qinghua felt his lungs freeze. He was vividly, horribly aware that in another timeline, this demon had casually ended his life.

"Your... *friend*?" Mobei-Jun finally rumbled, the word sounding foreign and slightly disdainful on his tongue.

"Yes! My—my friend!" Shang Qinghua confirmed, his voice trembling. "He's missing. I have to find him."

Mobei-Jun studied him for a long, unnerving moment, as if looking for something. "The Southern lands are in turmoil. A human war brews. This one does not involve himself in the squabbles of ants." He turned away, a clear dismissal.

But just as Shang Qinghua's heart plummeted into his boots, Mobei-Jun spoke again, his back still turned. "The scent of heavenly demon is strong on this affair. Look to the one who holds the fractured sword. He is the vortex. All things are drawn to him."

It wasn't a location. It wasn't a guarantee. But it was more than he'd had before. It was a thread, offered by a king who had no reason to give him one.

Now, back in his office, clutching that thread, Shang Qinghua held onto the memory of Shen Yuan's voice. *Make it work for us.*

He grabbed his seal, his hand still shaking, but his jaw set. He slammed it onto the first document with a wet, messy thud.

“Okay,” he breathed, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. “Okay, Cucumber-bro. No more hysterical fits. You built this shitty system, Airplane. Now make it work for us.”

He was just a cowardly author. But he was a cowardly author who remembered the taste of swamp-water tea, the grudging, vital presence of a friend, and the cryptic hint of an icy king. And for that, he would move heaven, earth, and the entire global economy to burn their enemies to the ground. The first move was made.

As the first of Shang Qinghua’s destabilizing edicts began their invisible journey into the world’s trade networks, the next phase of Shen Jiu’s design unfolded simultaneously. While gold was targeted on An Ding, reputation was targeted on Xian Shu. The war for minds began just as the war for coin was declared.

The air in Qi Qingqi's private pavilion was scented with plum blossom and quiet fury. Before her, her most clever, discreet disciples stood at attention, their faces masks of serene determination.

"You have your targets," Qi Qingqi said, her voice as crisp as the autumn air. "The teahouses frequented by Huan Hua's junior disciples. The inns where their outer court officials rest. You will not be crude. You will be… concerned."

She paced before them, a predator in silk. "You will speak of how taxing the conference preparations have been on the Old Palace Master. How his hand sometimes trembles when he lifts his tea. How his laughter seems a little too forced. You will sigh, and wonder aloud if the burden of leadership is too much for a man still grieving a disciple lost so long ago. Your words will be honey, but their aftertaste will be poison."

As her disciples bowed and melted away to begin their work, Qi Qingqi stood alone, her own reflection staring back from a polished bronze mirror.

It was after a Peak Lord meeting where she had passionately, and she thought quite effectively, argued for a greater share of resources for Xian Shu's musical cultivation programs. Shen Yuan had waited until the room emptied, then ambled over, a faint, infuriating smile on his lips.

"A stirring performance, Qi shijie," he'd said, his tone light. "All that fire and passion. Truly, it must be exhausting to wield such a blunt instrument."

She had bristled. "And I suppose you have a more refined tool in mind, Shen shixiong?"

"Naturally," he replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "You argued that your disciples deserved more because their art is beautiful. He," he gestured vaguely in the direction of the departed Sect Leader, "hears that you want more. A want is a child's plea. A need, backed by a demonstration of how your disciples' 'beautiful art' can be used to soothe agitated spirit beasts on his peak, thereby preventing property damage and saving the sect money… that is a negotiation." He tilted his head, that damnable teasing glint in his eyes. "Why swing a war hammer when a single, well-placed needle to the right pressure point can paralyze the entire body?"

Furious, she had stalked off without another word. But the next time a budget was discussed, she had done exactly as he'd suggested, framing her request around the tangible benefits to the entire sect. The resources were granted with barely a murmur of dissent.

A week later, she found a small, exquisitely wrapped box on her desk. Inside, nestled on velvet, was a single, flawless silver needle. There was no note. None was needed. When she saw him later that day in the gardens, he merely caught her eye, raised one eyebrow, and gave a slow, deliberate blink—a gesture of such profound, smug satisfaction that she nearly threw a rock at him. He'd laughed, the sound bright and unguarded, before turning back to his plants.

Now, looking back, the memory held a different weight. That insufferable, teasing bastard, with his infuriatingly sharp mind and his backhanded lessons, was *theirs*. He was Cang Qiong's. He might delight in flustering her, but his advice, however ruthlessly delivered, had always been meant to make their sect stronger. He saw the world as a series of interlocking systems, and he had dedicated his life to understanding and protecting theirs.

A fierce, protective pride swelled in her chest. They had taken *their* bastard. The one who understood the subtle poisons in the soil and the precise pressure points of their enemies. They thought they were dealing with simple brutes and scholars.

They would learn that Cang Qiong's roots ran deep, and they were all, every one of them, poisonous in their own way. And they were all, to a one, ready to wield the needles their Gardener had so ruthlessly taught them how to use.

Turning from the mirror, her expression was one of grim satisfaction. Let Huan Hua try to find the source of the whispers. Let them try to fight a mist that eroded their leader's stature day by day. They would find no blade to parry, only the creeping, chilling doubt that their great leader was, after all, just a tired, paranoid old man. It was a ruin far more complete than any shattered wall.

Shen Yuan awoke to the scent of sandalwood and the feel of silk. The agonizing ache in his back was gone, replaced by the dull, clean throb of expertly healed flesh. He was in a chamber of understated opulence, all dark wood and subtle, woven-silk murals. It was a far cry from the dripping filth of the Water Prison.

The door slid open. Tianlang-Jun stood there, his posture one of regal ease, but his eyes held the cold, flat light of a starless night.

“Consciousness returns,” he observed, his voice devoid of warmth. “Good. A tool must be functional to be of use.”

Shen Yuan pushed himself upright, the movement stiff. “Tian, what?…” The old, casual name slipped out, a relic from a simpler time.

A muscle in Tianlang-Jun’s jaw tightened. “That man was a fool who trusted a human’s smile. He is gone. You now speak to the Lord of the Southern Demon Realm.” He stepped further into the room, his presence seeming to suck the warmth from the air. “Your knowledge of the cultivation world’s delicate, interwoven ecologies is… unparalleled. You will provide it.”

He outlined his plan with a chilling, geometric clarity, his voice a low, relentless drumbeat.

“Destruction is so crude. I prefer… rebalancing.” Tianlang-Jun’s smile was a thin, cruel line.

“For instance, the Glacial-Winged Swallows. Their migration is critical to the pollination of the Spirit-Soothing Peonies on Qiong Ding, which in turn are the primary ingredient in the Calming Elixirs used to treat qi deviations. What would happen, I wonder, if a new, aggressive species of Shadow-Moth were introduced to their nesting cliffs? The swallows would be driven off. The peonies would wither. And the rate of qi deviations in Cang Qiong’s most promising disciples would… spike. Tragic, but natural. An ecological shift.”

He paused, letting the horrifying specificity of the scenario sink in. It was not a threat of violence, but of a patient, undetectable unraveling.

“Then there is the Lily Sprouting Axolotl,” he continued, his tone conversational. “Its saliva is the only known catalyst for the Flesh-Eating Fire Lilies. Without it, your famed xianxia burn cream cannot be made. How would the sects cope, I wonder, if the axolotls were to simply… vanish? A mystery. A slow-burning crisis. No bloodshed. Just a creeping, inexorable loss.”

He leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “I have spent decades studying your work, Shen Qingchun. I know every thread in the tapestry you have spent your life weaving. I will not cut a single human throat. I will simply pull on the threads, one by one, and watch the entire beautiful, intricate system you built for them come apart in their hands. Your cooperation ensures the tapestry remains intact.”

Before Shen Yuan could form a response, the air in the chamber rippled. A communication array, dark and edged in crimson, flared to life. Gongyi Xiao’s voice, earnest and fervent, echoed in the stone room.

"Tianlang-Jun. It is done. The Cang Qiong Peak Lords… they have gone mad."

The report was a recitation of a world ending. Wei Qingwei shattering his own sacred swords. Shang Qinghua poisoning rivers. Liu Qingge entombing himself as a wall of slaughter. A suicide note written in the language of their own ruin.

For him.

The air left Shen Yuan’s lungs in a silent, agonized rush. He saw it, vivid and horrifying: A-Jiu, orchestrating their mutual ruin. Qi-ge, his gentle heart broken, giving the order to salt the earth. They were setting their world on fire, hoping the heat would somehow bring him home.

And it was *his* fault. His grand, logical, self-sacrificial plan had been the spark. The clinical detachment he wore like armor shattered, leaving only a raw, gaping wound of guilt.

Tianlang-Jun listened, a faint, cruel smile touching his lips. "The lamb, when its shepherd is taken, will gore itself on the wolf's teeth in its panic. They prove my point for me. Their

'righteous' order is a thin veneer over base savagery."

But Shen Yuan didn't hear the gloating. He was lost in the roaring silence of his own failure.

“I understand,” Shen Yuan whispered, the words ash in his mouth.

Tianlang-Jun gave a curt nod and turned to leave. And yet as he reached the door, Shen Yuan, driven by a desperate, bewildered need for any scrap of the past, (something, anything,) spoke again. “The protagonist… in *The Ravishing Harem of the Demonic Sage*… he never did get his memory back, did he? It was a cheap plot device to avoid character growth.”

Tianlang-Jun froze, his back rigid. For a single, suspended moment, the air in the room grew even colder. Then, without turning, he replied, his voice like cracking ice, “Some betrayals are so profound, they erase everything that came before. The plot demanded it.” The door slid shut behind him with a whisper of finality.

Alone in his own chambers, Tianlang-Jun stood before a heavy chest. He unlocked it with a pulse of demonic energy. Inside, nestled among maps and tactical scrolls, was a worn, dog-eared copy of the very novel Shen Yuan had mentioned.

His fingers, usually so steady, hovered over the cheap paper. He could almost hear the ghost of an argument, a younger Shen Yuan’s voice, full of passionate, pedantic fury: *“It’s not about the memory loss, it’s about the betrayal of the reader’s investment!”*

He had laughed then, delighted by the sheer intensity of the other man’s outrage over something so trivial.

Zhuzhi-lang watched from the shadows as his uncle’s hand trembled, then coiled into a white-knuckled fist. *He remembered the tea-house,* Zhuzhi-lang thought, his own heart aching. *He remembered the human who was not afraid.*

The fist came down. Not on the book, but on the chest's lid, slamming it shut with a finality that made the lanterns flicker. The echo was a punctuation mark on a sentence of pure, self-directed fury.

"His sentimentality is a weapon I cannot wield," Tianlang-Jun spoke to the empty air, his voice low and grating. "To threaten the beasts and the blooms… it is a strategic necessity. It speaks a language he understands. Clean. Logical."

Zhuzhi-lang said nothing, but the faint rustle of his scales was answer enough. He remembered the Ling You Peak Lord, the only human besides Su Xiyan who had ever looked at his serpent form not with fear, but with calm, academic curiosity.

He turned, his eyes, burning with cold fire, found Zhuzhi-lang. "It would be more effective to threaten *his people*, his disciples perhaps. To hold a blade to something warm and breathing would shatter his composure far more quickly than any ecological theory."

Zhuzhi-lang said nothing, but the faint rustle of his scales was answer enough.

Tianlang-Jun's gaze sharpened, reading the unspoken protest. A more potent threat formed in his mind, precise and brutal. *I will have your head disciple, Fu Xin, brought here. You will watch as I unmake him.*

The words were a blade, poised to strike. But before he could voice them, the echo of Gongyi Xiao's report returned—*They are destroying themselves to get him back*—and with it, a fleeting, unwelcome image: Shen Yuan's face in that chamber moments ago, not shattered by a new threat, but utterly *devastated* by that news. The light in his eyes hadn't been terror; it had been the grief of a man watching his own family immolate itself for his sake.

A memory, sharp, cut through the icy fortress of his heart:

A sun-drenched market stall, the air thick with the scent of oil and spices. Shen Yuan, younger, his face alight not with scholarly detachment, but with passionate, pedantic fury,

was gesturing wildly with a fried dumpling, arguing about the flawed morality of a fictional demon lord. A young Zhuzhi-lang, peeking from behind his uncle's robes, was watching, mesmerized. And Su Xiyan… Su Xiyan had been there, her stern features softened by a rare, genuine smile, her shoulder brushing his as she listened to the ridiculous debate. It had been a perfect, stolen moment of unguarded camaraderie. A moment of friendship.

The memory was a shard of glass in his soul, a poignant ache for a time when his world held more than just the taste of betrayal. He had *adored* that. The sheer, unvarnished honesty of Shen Yuan's intellect, the way he treated a Demon not as a blight, but as a mind worthy of debate. For a heartbeat, the cold fire of vengeance guttered, threatened by a warmer, more devastating emotion: a profound disturbance at the sight of his friend—and he could not, even now, fully deny that Shen Yuan had been that—in such utter despair.

No.

He crushed the feeling, ruthlessly, the internal motion so violent it was a form of self-flagellation. *Sentiment is a weapon for the weak. The past is a corpse.* He would not let its ghost disarm him.

He turned his face away from Zhuzhi-lang, a minute, sharp adjustment, as if physically wrenching himself from the memory's pull.

"No," he said, the word flat and final, a command to himself as much as to the room. He did not offer a reason. He could not confess that the human's despairing loyalty had felt like a more profound wound than any threat he could deliver, or that the ghost of a friendship he genuinely cherished had, for a terrifying moment, made his grand revenge feel hollow. He simply turned and swept from the room, his robes whispering against the floor like a retreating tide, the ghost of that shared laughter a bitter, un-erasable stain on his resolve.

He simply turned and swept from the room, his robes whispering against the floor like a retreating tide, leaving Zhuzhi-lang to understand the most dangerous truth of all: his uncle's vengeance was a fortress built on a foundation of grief, and that foundation was beginning to crack.

The air in the Wan Jian Peak forges, usually ringing with the disciplined music of creation, had fallen into a heavy, discordant silence. The fires still roared, but their light now glinted off something other than freshly tempered steel.

Wei Qingwei stood before the Great Armory Vault, its massive doors thrown open to reveal the heart of Cang Qiong's martial power. Racks upon racks of spiritual swords stood in silent ranks, each one a named, cherished masterpiece, humming with latent power. They were the legacy of generations of Peak Lords, the soul of the mountain's defense.

His disciples stood behind him, their faces pale and grim, watching as their Shizun did not reach for a hammer. He walked the rows, his calloused fingers not touching hilts, but hovering just above them, listening.

A memory of simpler times resurfaced:

Shen Yuan, sprawled on a bench in the Ling You greenhouse, gesturing with a pruning shear as he dissected the legend of the mythical Xin Mo.

"It's not just a demonic blade, Wei-shidi, it's a parasitic consciousness," Shen Yuan had argued, his eyes alight with that particular fervor he reserved for deconstructing the world's absurdities. *"The texts treat it as a tool, but the effects on the wielder's mind—the amplification of negative emotion, the possessive drive—suggest a symbiotic, or rather, a predatory relationship. The sword isn't just used; it feeds. It has a will. To ignore that is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of such artifacts."*

Wei Qingwei had grunted then, more focused on the tension in a newly forged blade. Now, the lesson echoed with terrifying relevance. Every sword in this vault had a spirit, a nascent consciousness born of qi, intent, and centuries of devotion. They were not mere metal.

His hand stopped over a sleek, silver sword named "Frostfall." Its song in his mind was a clean, piercing note of readiness. He pressed his will against it, not a command, but a

question—an image of shattering, of becoming a thousand glittering shards in a storm meant to scour the golden walls of Huan Hua Palace.

A pulse of cold, sharp agreement answered him. *Frostfall* understood sacrifice.

He moved on. His fingers hovered over a heavy, brutal cleaver named “Mountain-Sunder.” Its spirit was a stubborn, grounding force. He projected the same vision. A wave of reluctance met him, a sense of immovable stone. This one would not break. It would not serve that purpose.

Wei Qingwei nodded, a silent acknowledgment, and moved past it. He would not force it. A shattered sword with an unwilling spirit would be just dead metal; it would lack the resonant, harmonious dirge he needed.

It was a grim census, to seek out the spirits who understood the necessity, who were willing to turn their very essence into a final, devastating chorus. The selection was a slow, solemn process, a quiet negotiation with the very soul of his peak. The storm was being curated, not unleashed.

This meticulous, chilling preparation was a world away from the scene unfolding on Bai Zhan Peak. While Wei Qingwei communed with willing steel, Liu Qingge was dealing with a far less refined, but equally potent, form of readiness. The silence of the forges was about to be shattered by the sound of a very different kind of impending war.

The Serpent’s Spine Pass, once a stark and windswept trade route, had been utterly transformed. On the Cang Qiong side, the grim banners of Bai Zhan Peak snapped in the turbulent air above a sprawling, militarized camp. But this was no mere encampment of resting soldiers; it was a living engine of war, perpetually active. The very ground trembled, not from an earthquake, but from the synchronized footfalls of seven hundred cultivators executing complex, shifting formations with the precision of a machine and the force of a landslide.

The air itself was thick, soupy with unleashed spiritual pressure, making it difficult to breathe for anyone not accustomed to the brutal environment of Bai Zhan. The constant, thunderous *crump* of spiritual techniques impacting heavily shielded training dummies

echoed like a relentless drumbeat of impending violence. Sparring matches were not the elegant, measured duels of other peaks; they were brutal, explosive affairs that sent plumes of dust and shards of rock fountaining into the sky, each clash a miniature cataclysm contained only by the sheer will of its participants. This was a continuous, deafening demonstration of power, a performance staged with meticulous, aggressive intent precisely at the edge of Huan Hua territory.

At the heart of this controlled maelstrom stood Liu Qingge. He was not a commander barking orders from a safe remove; he was the epicenter of the storm, moving through the chaos with a predator's grace. He didn't shout. A flick of his wrist, a sharp, cutting gesture, and a dozen disciples would instantly adjust their stance. He would step into the path of a sparring match, deflecting a potentially bone-shattering blow with the flat of Cheng Luan, delivering a single, bruising correction to a disciple's form with a touch that was both critique and lesson, and then move on, leaving behind a cultivator with a new, visceral understanding of their art. This was the statement, written in the only language Bai Zhan truly understood: overwhelming, disciplined, and barely contained violence, held at the very precipice of their enemy's doorstep.

The memory surfaced not as a gentle recollection, but as a stark, vivid image that momentarily eclipsed the roaring training ground.

It was years ago, during a joint night-hunt. A misstep, a clever ambush by a pack of Shadow-Stalker Wolves, and Liu Qingge had found himself separated, a deep, spiritually corrosive gash on his leg. He'd been cornered, Cheng Luan a familiar weight, his mind already calculating the angles of a final, devastating counterattack that would likely shatter his already strained meridians. He was the War God of Bai Zhan. He did not need saving; he needed a viable exit strategy.

Then, a flash of green. Shen Yuan landed not in front of him, but slightly to the side, his presence an addition to the battlefield, not a replacement.

"The cliff," Shen Yuan said, his tone the same one he used when pointing out a flawed training dummy design. "Ledge ten feet down, behind the Veil-Moss. Your left is clear for a full-power swing to cover the drop."

No pity. No panic. Just a tactical assessment delivered with the calm certainty of a man reading a map. It was the lack of condescension that made Liu Qingge listen. He wasn't being protected; he was being given a better strategic option.

He executed the swing, a blast of spiritual energy that forced the wolves back, and dropped to the ledge. He looked up to see Shen Yuan not "holding them off," but actively redirecting them. A sonic talisman hurt their ears, herding them away from the cliff edge. A thrown pellet released the scent of a rival alpha, splitting their focus. It was efficient, intelligent support that maximized Liu Qingge's own opening.

When the pack dispersed, Shen Yuan climbed down. He didn't ask if Liu Qingge was alright. He saw the corrosive wound, knelt, and produced a poultice.

"This will neutralize the venom," he stated. "It will hurt."

It did. A clean, sharp pain. Liu Qingge grunted in acknowledgment, his gaze fixed on the top of Shen Yuan's bowed head. This was what he understood. Action. Solution. No lingering hands, no whispered words of concern. Just a problem being solved.

Later, after the Lingxi Caves, when the weight of the life-debt should have hung between them, nothing changed. Shen Yuan never mentioned it. The next time they met, it was to spar, and Shen Yuan had called him a "muscle-headed brute" for a poorly controlled strike that damaged a rare sapling. He was the same. He was always the same. A fixed point. A sparring partner who fought without holding back, a critic who voiced his displeasure without sugarcoating, and a presence that was simply *there*, strangely fragile in the wake of his fight with his brother, but still reliable and uncomplicated in its constancy.

Now, standing at the border, the memory was a fresh, sharp ache. The one fixed point in his world was gone. The one who treated his strength as a given and his failures as temporary logistical errors had been taken. And the only way Liu Qingge knew to protest such a fundamental disruption to the universe's order was to become a cataclysm on the doorstep of the thieves. He would be the unbreachable wall, the roaring storm, until the quiet, constant presence that anchored him was returned.

It was then that a delegation from Huan Hua appeared on the Cang Qiong side of the pass, their gilded robes a garish, offensive splash of color against the grim landscape. They were led by a senior elder, his face a mask of flustered indignation, clutching formal scrolls of protest. A dozen senior disciples flanked him, their hands resting nervously on their sword hilts.

"Peak Lord Liu!" the elder called out, his voice straining to be heard over the roaring cacophony of Bai Zhan's drills. He had to shout to be heard over the sound of a practice boulder being vaporized by a coordinated spiritual blast. "This... this unprecedented mobilization is an unconscionable act of aggression! A blatant provocation! We demand you withdraw your forces immediately and cease these… these warlike exercises!"

Liu Qingge did not turn. He did not speak. He did not even seem to breathe differently.

He simply raised a closed fist.

The effect was instantaneous and terrifying. As if a single, collective nerve had been severed, every training exercise ceased. The roaring din, the tremors, the explosions—all cut off into a silence so profound and sudden it was a physical blow. In the settling dust, seven hundred Bai Zhan disciples turned in perfect, unnerving unison. Not a single sword was drawn. Not a single word was spoken. They simply stood, their collective gaze a solid wall of silent, unwavering glares fixed upon the Huan Hua delegation. The air, once thick with chaotic energy, was now thick with a different, more potent force: pure, undiluted killing intent, focused and honed to a razor's edge.

The elder’s words died in his throat. The color drained from his face. The disciples behind him shuffled back as one, their hands now gripping their sword hilts white-knuckled, their eyes wide with a primal fear. The sheer, focused will in the eyes of the War God and his entire peak was a tangible weight, a promise of immediate and total annihilation held back by a thread of restraint.

Liu Qingge lowered his fist.

The training exercises resumed not with a slow build, but with a sudden, explosive cacophony that was somehow even louder than before, as if the silence itself had been compressed into a new, more violent sound. It drowned out any possibility of further protest.

The Huan Hua delegation retreated in a disorderly clump, their formal scrolls of protest feeling like pathetic, meaningless scraps of paper in the face of such raw, unspoken power. They would, of course, send furious, lengthy missives to Qiong Ding Peak, decrying this act of aggression bordering on open war. But in their hearts, as they fled the oppressive spiritual pressure of the pass, they knew the truth. They were terrified. To trigger a direct confrontation here was to willingly throw themselves upon the blades of the most formidable, disciplined, and now utterly enraged fighters in the entire cultivation world. The unbreachable wall stood, a testament to a stolen peace, and all they could do was watch from a distance, and seethe, and fear.

The air at the Qiong Ding border no longer carried the scent of pine. It crackled with contained lightning and resonated with a single, focused chant. Yue Qingyuan did not stand in serene meditation. He was a conductor of a silent, overwhelming orchestra.

Pointing towards the magnificent, gilded gates of Huan Hua Palace, on Cang Qiong's own land, he had arrayed the full, ceremonial might of Qiong Ding Peak. Five hundred core disciples stood not in a circle, but in a vast, arrowhead formation aimed directly at the heart of Huan Hua. Their combined spiritual power did not form a protective dome. It was a spear—a colossal, shimmering lance of pure, righteous energy that visually and spiritually pierced the sky, its focused tip a silent, constant accusation aimed at Huan Hua's very gates. It was not a shield; it was a weapon of light and judgment, held at the ready without being thrown.

It was impossible to look away from. It demanded a response, it demanded all of Huan Hua's attention, resources, and fear.

To the Huan Hua delegation stumbling to a halt, it was a declaration of war written in light. Elder Feng gasped, his golden robes seeming to wither under the focused pressure. A junior disciple behind him cried out, his own nascent golden core flaring in painful, sympathetic dissonance.

"Sect Leader Yue!" Feng's voice was a ragged tear in the formation's harmonious, threatening hum. "This... this is a siege! An act of war!"

Yue Qingyuan stood at the apex of the spiritual spear, his hands clasped behind his back. He turned, his expression not serene, but placidly, terrifyingly resolute. "Elder Feng is mistaken," he replied, his voice calm, carrying effortlessly to the guards now crowding Huan Hua's ramparts.

"We are conducting an advanced spiritual exercise. Our disciples must be prepared to confront and purify any darkness, no matter how grand its gates." He offered a small, benign smile that was more threatening than any scowl. "Huan Hua does not object to our preparedness drills, does it?"

Elder Feng’s face mottled, his mouth opening and closing. To object was to admit they felt targeted, to confess that this light saw something dark within them. He spun on his heel, his delegation scrambling after him, their postures bent as if the very air had become an enemy. They were not just being judged; they were being held at spiritual spear-point by the most powerful cultivator of their generation, and there was not a single law or treaty he was breaking. The golden target shone, blindingly brilliant, and from its shadow, the real knives began to move.

Days later, in a bustling tea house frequented by minor sect officials, the air was thick with the news. A Huan Hua envoy, his voice trembling with theatrical indignation, read from a formal scroll. "...'unconscionable acts of aggression' and 'spiritually hostile rituals'... they must be held to account!"

His words, however, landed on soil already poisoned by doubt. The patrons had heard other things. They had heard of trade routes mysteriously collapsing, of merchants suddenly refusing Huan Hua's business. They had heard the distant, unsettling tremors from the Serpent's Spine Pass, a constant reminder that the War God himself was camped on their doorstep. And now, this.

At a nearby table, a Xian Shu disciple in elegant but unadorned robes set down her cup with a soft, precise click. She did not look at the envoy. She spoke to her companion, her voice a

carrying, melodic murmur.

"It is frightening, isn't it?" she said, her eyes wide with feigned concern. "To think a Peak Lord could be stolen so easily from the heart of an allied sect's territory. Is it any wonder Bai Zhan sharpens its blades? One cannot blame a guard dog for barking when thieves have already been in the house."

Her companion, another Xian Shu disciple, nodded sagely. " And the purification... such a powerful, draining ritual. Our Sect Leader spends his own spiritual strength, not for conquest, but to build a shield for us all. It is the work of a true guardian. One almost wonders... why would anyone protest a shield, unless they preferred the darkness it keeps out?"

The Huan Hua envoy’s face flushed a deep, furious red. This was the core of their terror, laid bare in a public tea house. It wasn't just the spiritual discomfort or the legal outrage. It was the chilling, unspoken calculation Yue Qingyuan's display forced upon them.

To move against the Bai Zhan blockade was to invite the War God's wrath.

To confront the Qiong Ding formation was to test the full, unmasked power of the cultivation world's strongest sect leader.

To do nothing was to watch their economy strangle and their reputation rot from the inside out.

They were caught in a perfect, inescapable trap, where every potential response led to ruin. The envoy's scroll, filled with legalistic outrage, suddenly felt like a pathetic list of complaints against an oncoming tsunami. He rolled it up with a sharp, defeated motion, the official seals now seeming garish and foolish. The protest died in the air.

The news of Cang Qiong’s mobilization reached Huan Hua Palace as a creeping, chaotic fever. The Old Palace Master, ensconced in his golden hall, decided on a measured retaliation. A fleet of three ornate skyships, banners flying high, was dispatched to intercept

and confiscate a key shipment of spiritual ore from Cang Qiong, a clear message that their trade lines were vulnerable.

It was a logical, political move. It was also precisely the opening Shen Jiu had been waiting for.

The skyships never reached the supply route. They were intercepted not by an army, but by a single, sleek Cang Qiong vessel. Standing on its deck was Shen Jiu, flanked by a dozen of his most elite Qing Jing disciples, all holding not swords, but scrolls and writing boxes.

As the Huan Hua captain hailed them, demanding they stand aside, Shen Jiu's voice cut through the air, sharp and cold. "You are in violation of Inter-Sect Airspace Accord, Subsection 7-B, regarding the declaration of non-commercial flight paths over sovereign spiritual territories. Furthermore, your vessel's spiritual emission signature exceeds the limits stipulated in the Treaty of White Peaks, risking destabilization of the local ley lines. We are here to perform a compliance inspection."

A memory, unbidden, surfaced in Shen Jiu's mind: *Himself, a new Peak Lord, frustrated by Huan Hua's political maneuvering. Shen Yuan, looking up from a scroll, his expression thoughtful. "You cannot fight their gold or their armies directly, A-Jiu. But they are arrogant. They believe their power puts them above the very rules they helped write. That is a cage they have built for themselves. One simply needs to lock the door."*

The Huan Hua captain spluttered. "This is an outrage! We are on a diplomatic mission!"

"Diplomatic missions," Shen Jiu retorted, unrolling a scroll with a flick of his wrist, "require prior notification under Statute 12, which you have failed to provide. My disciples will now board your vessels to inspect your cargo manifests and spiritual core calibration logs. Any resistance will be considered an act of aggression under international law."

What followed was not a battle, but a masterclass in bureaucratic suffocation. For six hours, Qing Jing disciples assisted by their An Ding siblings swarmed the Huan Hua skyships, not with violence, but with clipboards and sealing talismans. They found every minor infraction, every outdated permit, every technicality. They "discovered" that the ships' waste-disposal talismans were not of the approved Huan Hua model, creating a "potential bio-hazard." They declared the captain's own cultivation license needed "re-authentication" due to a clerical error.

Humiliated, immobilized by a web of their own rules, and facing the threat of having their prestigious vessels impounded over paperwork, the Huan Hua fleet was forced to turn back.

Back on Qiong Ding Peak, Yue Qingyuan received the report in the deep silence of his personal quarters. The brilliant, ruthless success of the operation settled in his chest not as a victory, but as a fresh, private grief. This was A-Jiu's mind, sharpened to a razor's edge—the same mind that had once devised intricate games to make a sickly, bookish boy smile. And it was A-Yuan's lesson, twisted into a weapon—the same calm logic that had once been used to share a single stolen bun three ways. He saw the two brothers he loved reflected in this cold, perfect strategy: one's intellect and the other's wisdom, perverted by his own failure to protect them. He had failed to bring them home as children, and now, as men, they were lost to this beautiful, terrible war they waged for each other, leaving him alone to admire the devastating architecture of their shared ruin.

The atmosphere in the Qiong Ding meeting hall was thick enough to choke on. The usual undercurrent of bickering and bureaucratic sniping had been replaced by a grim, focused tension. Reports of poisoned rivers and impounded skyships were one thing. This was something else entirely.

Shang Qinghua, having just finished a frantic, whispered report, looked like a man who had seen his own meticulously kept ledgers spontaneously combust.

"He did *what*?" Qi Qingqi's voice cut through the silence, sharp with disbelief.

Luo Binghe stood in the ruins of the Verdant Sword Sect, a minor but ancient cultivation sect whose ancestral home bordered the demonic realms. The air reeked of ozone and blood. Xin Mo thrummed in his hand, a black hole of hunger that mirrored the void in his own chest. For weeks, he had torn through the underbelly of both worlds, following every whisper, every trail.

He had found nothing.

No trace, no scent, no hint of who had taken what was his from under Huan Hua's nose. The frustration was a physical acid in his veins, and Xin Mo drank it greedily, whispering of impotence and failure.

His gaze fell upon the kneeling, trembling form of the Verdant Sword Sect Leader. The man's eyes were wide with terror, not just of the demonic energy roiling off Luo Binghe, but of the sword in his hand—a blade that seemed to devour the very light.

"You… you are a half-breed abomination!" the Sect Leader spat, a final, futile act of defiance.

Luo Binghe's smile was a ghastly, bloodless thing. "Am I?"

He didn't bother with a denial. Instead, he let his demonic mark flare upon his brow, a crimson sigil of undeniable heritage. He raised Xin Mo, and with a single, contemptuous swing, he didn't just kill the Sect Leader; he severed the ancient spiritual ley line that fed the sect's protective arrays. The very mountain beneath them groaned as its heart was cut out.

"This one is no mere half-breed," Luo Binghe's voice echoed, amplified by Xin Mo's power, reaching every surviving disciple and the legions of demonic soldiers Mobei-Jun had quietly assembled at his back. "I am the union of two worlds. The heir to a power your kind could never comprehend."

He turned, his eyes, burning with chaotic fire, sweeping over the assembled might. "From this day forth, I am Luo Binghe, the Half-Blood Sovereign. This land is mine. The demons of the Northern Territories already kneel." Here, he glanced at Mobei-Jun, who stood as an icy pillar of silent allegiance, having investigated and found the Southern borders quiet, suspicious, but offering no clear trail. "The cultivation world will learn its place. There will be no more hiding. No more shadows."

It was a power move straight from the pages of *Proud Immortal Demon Way*—a dramatic, brutal declaration of existence. But as the terrified cries of the Verdant Sword Sect echoed

around him, Luo Binghe felt no thrill of conquest. The void in his chest only yawned wider, a chasm that Xin Mo fed upon, its whispers twisting into a single, agonizing memory.

The Water Prison. The scent of damp stone and blood. Shen Yuan, shivering on the floor, flinching back from a simple cup of water. The shattered jade. The rejection wasn't just of the water; it was of him.

"Is there nothing I can give you?" *he remembered thinking, his mind cracking with a despair so profound it felt like his soul was fraying. The memory of the Endless Abyss slammed into him then—not the fall, but the moment before. That face, usually so alive with clever, hidden thoughts, had been a beautiful, empty mask. There had been no hatred, no anger. Just a hollow resignation as he placed Luo Binghe into hell. And beneath that memory, another, more painful one: a rare, private smile Shen shibo had once given him in the Ling You greenhouse after he'd successfully nurtured a dying Moon-Tear Orchid back to health. A smile of pure, unguarded approval that had felt warmer than any spiritual energy.*

The juxtaposition was a fresh agony. How could the man who offered that smile be the same one who cast him away with such chilling finality?

Xin Mo screamed in counterpoint, its energy a black tide urging him to take *instead, to force a connection, to make Shen Yuan acknowledge the bond between them, even if it had to be carved into his flesh. He had wanted to surge forward in the prison, to grip Shen shibo's shoulders, to just ask him, he remembered his mind screaming at him to just ask shibo.* ***"What do you want? Tell me what you want and I will carve it from the heavens and lay it at your feet. Just... just stop looking through me. Look at me. See me. Even if it is to curse me, just see me!"***

The desperation was a living thing, clawing at his throat. But beneath the unhinged plea, a cold, calculating part of his mind, sharpened by Xin Mo's predatory instincts, was already working. If kindness was rejected and pleading was ignored, then only power remained. Absolute, undeniable power. The kind that could not be pushed away. The kind that could scour the world until there was nowhere left for Shen Yuan to hide, no one else to look at, no choice but to turn his gaze back to the monster he had created.

He turned from the carnage in the present, his eyes, burning with chaotic fire, sweeping over the assembled might. “From this day forth, I am Luo Binghe, the Half-Blood Sovereign. This land is mine.” The declaration was a snarl of desperation wrapped in the ice-cold calculus of possession. He would build a throne from the rubble of nations, not for glory, but to construct a cage vast enough that the one person he needed would finally, inevitably, be trapped within his sight.

"The Verdant Sword Sect," Shang Qinghua repeated, his voice trembling as he waved a hastily scribbled missive. "Gone. Wiped from the map. Not just defeated—*annexed*. And he didn't stop there! He's carved out a chunk of the northern demonic territories too! He's declared himself the 'Half-Blood Sovereign' and he's... he's just *sitting* there, right on our doorstep, building a fortress!"

A beat of stunned silence followed.

Wei Qingwei grunted, his arms crossed. "So the beast finally sheds his sheep's clothing. This was always his nature."

"But the *timing*!" Shang Qinghua wailed, his composure fully shattered. "It makes no logistical sense! For *him*! We're tied up with Huan Hua, yes, but he's a brand-new power! He has no supply lines, no established trade, no administrative structure! Conquering a sect and a chunk of demonic territory in one week is one thing, but *holding* them? The Verdant Sword lands are spiritually barren, the northern demons are fractious—Mobei-Jun can only intimidate them for so long! He's stretching his own nascent forces across two hostile fronts! He'll be bankrupt in morale and resources within a month! It's a massive, flashy power play with no foundation! He's building a house on a foundation of sand and actively setting it on fire at the same time!"

His mind was a whirlwind of catastrophic projections, but now they were from the *enemy's* perspective. This wasn't the calculated rise of a demon emperor; it was the desperate, overextended lunge of someone with no long-term plan. And that, in Shang Qinghua's professional opinion, was even more terrifying than a competent adversary.

This wasn't in the script! The protagonist wasn't supposed to make his big power move while the main setting was already on fire!

Shen Jiu, who had been listening with a face of frozen marble, finally spoke, his fan held perfectly still. "He is not creating a second front. He is exploiting a vacuum."

All eyes turned to him.

"The Verdant Sword Sect was weak. Isolated. Its destruction costs him little. Its location, however, is strategically invaluable. It gives him a foothold in the cultivation world and a bridge to his demonic forces. He is not launching an invasion." Shen Jiu's lips curled into a cold, knowing sneer. "He is building a perch. A stage. He is making sure that when he makes his next move, the entire world will be forced to watch."

Liu Qingge's hand tightened on Cheng Luan's hilt. "Let him come. We will be waiting."

"But *why*?" Shang Qinghua insisted, pulling at his hair. "What's his goal? Revenge? Conquest? It doesn't make tactical sense to reveal himself like this while we're already—"

"He is not acting like a general," Shen Jiu interrupted, his voice dropping, each word precise and chilling. "He is acting like a beast that has lost its prey. He is tearing apart the forest, not to conquer it, but because he cannot find the one rabbit he is hunting. This... this is not strategy. It is frenzy."

The truth of it settled over the room, colder and more frightening than any declaration of war. Luo Binghe wasn't playing the same game they were. He was rewriting the board in a fit of possessive, desperate rage, and none of them could predict what he would burn next.

The rustle of silk was the only sound in the obsidian-lined chamber. Shen Yuan’s brush moved methodically across the schematic of the Bailu Mountain seal, his mind a calm lake of analysis.

Then his brush stopped. Froze.

His head tilted, a minute, birdlike gesture of pure, uncomprehending shock. His eyes, previously focused, went wide, the pupils dilating as they scanned the same set of interlocking sigils again, and again.

It can’t be.

He saw it now. The seal wasn't just drawing ambient energy. The lines of power were too clean, too directed. They pointed like accusing fingers far beyond the mountain, converging on a single, vast source. A constructed source. A spiritual engine.

Huan Hua Palace.

Their wealth, their political dominance—it wasn't just for show. It was fuel. The seal was a parasite, and the entire sect was its host.

His brush clattered from his nerveless fingers.

From the shadows, Zhuzhi-lang stirred. He had seen many scholars study the seal. He had never seen one look at it with such dawning, horrified comprehension.

"You see it," Zhuzhi-lang stated, his voice a soft hiss. He did not need to elaborate. He saw the truth in the human's paralyzed stance, in the way he stared at the schematic as if it were a death warrant. "The bond. The seal and the sect are one. To break one is to destroy the other."

Shen Yuan’s head snapped up. For a single, unguarded moment, Zhuzhi-lang saw raw, animal terror in the human’s eyes. It was the look of a man who had just realized that freeing his captor would unleash an apocalypse.

Shen Yuan’s head snapped up. The academic detachment was gone, shattered. For a single, unguarded moment, Zhuzhi-lang saw raw, animal terror in the human’s eyes. It was the look of a man who had just read his own execution warrant and that of everyone he loved.

Then, just as quickly, it was gone. Swallowed. Shen Yuan’s gaze dropped back to the schematics, but the calm was gone, replaced by a frantic, almost violent intensity. His hands, now trembling slightly, flattened on the table, fingers splaying across the diagrams as if he could physically wrest the secret from them.

His mind, honed by a lifetime of survival and sharpened to a razor's edge by the news of his family's self-immolation, began to move at a terrifying speed. It was no longer analyzing. It was *hunting*. He wasn't looking for the way to break the seal. He was scouring the design for a flaw, a backdoor, a single, frayed thread he could pull to unravel the entire tapestry without triggering the cataclysm. His eyes darted across the parchment, no longer reading, but *devouring*, desperate for any anomaly, any paradox, any glimmer of a third option in a problem designed to have only two: doom, or a different, more personal doom.

That was when he pivoted. The frantic search for an escape twisted, transforming into the cold, calculated architecture of a lie.

The frantic energy in Shen Yuan’s posture did not abate, but its character shifted. The terror in his eyes banked, replaced by a hard, glittering focus. He looked from the schematics to Zhuzhi-lang, a slow, deliberate turn of his head.

“The bond,” Shen Yuan repeated, his voice low and charged with a new, intense purpose. “It’s not a weakness. It’s the key.” He stabbed a finger at the central nexus of the seal. “The energy flow is a two-way conduit. Tianlang-Jun was right—force from the outside is useless. But from the *inside*… if we can introduce a catalyst *through* Huan Hua’s own spiritual network, we can use their power against the seal. We can make it devour itself.”

It was a brilliant, ruthless lie, woven from a thread of truth. It was exactly the kind of cunning, indirect strategy Tianlang-Jun would admire. It sounded like a key. It was, in fact, a plan to detonate the Poisoned Bloom with maximum efficiency.

Zhuzhi-lang’s serpentine eyes narrowed slightly, but he saw the fierce conviction on Shen Yuan’s face, the intellectual fervor that masked a deeper, more personal desperation. He gave

a slow, approving nod. “This one will inform my uncle of your progress.” He slipped from the chamber, a silent shadow.

The moment the door hushed shut, Shen Yuan’s shoulders slumped. The mask of the cunning strategist fell away, leaving a man hollowed out by fear. He stumbled to a chest in the corner, throwing it open to reveal not spiritual tools, but the mundane, heartbreaking detritus of his old life: a worn cloth rabbit, a set of delicate pruning shears, a stack of notes in his own hand on Frost Toad mating calls.

His fingers closed around a small, smooth stone, a river stone he’d taken from the Ling You streams.

He was ten, and A-Jiu was five, huddled under a lean-to in a pounding rain. A-Jiu was shivering, his lips blue. “We’re not going to make it, Ge,” he’d whispered, his defiance finally crumbling. Shen Yuan, his own body wracked with chills, had pressed this same warm stone, heated by a tiny, sustained spark of his meager qi, into his brother’s hands. “We will,” he’d said, his voice steadier than he felt. “We always make it. I’ll find a way.”

He would find a way.

He dropped the stone and grabbed a blank scroll and a piece of rare, spiritually conductive charcoal. His hands shook, but his mind was a frozen, clear lake. He began to sketch not a key, but a scalpel. An array of breathtaking delicacy, designed not to break the seal, but to perform a spiritual amputation—to sever the symbiote’s connection with such surgical precision that the seal would wither and die without triggering the Poisoned Bloom. It was a theory, a prayer, a desperate attempt to save his family from the apocalyptic war his freedom would unleash.

He would find a way.

He had to.

The war room on Qiong Ding Peak was a study in controlled chaos, the air thick with the scent of ink and the silent, frantic energy of a sect preparing for a siege. A junior disciple, his robes stained with travel dust and his face a mask of pure terror, burst through the doors. He didn't just enter; he stumbled, his chest heaving, one hand braced against the doorframe as if his legs would not hold him.

All conversation died. Every Peak Lord turned.

"Speak," Yue Qingyuan commanded, his voice a low thrum of authority that cut through the tension.

The disciple tried to form words, but only a choked gasp emerged. He swallowed convulsively, his eyes wide with a horror that seemed to have frozen the very air in his lungs. "The summit..." he finally rasped, the words tearing from his throat. "The Hall of Celestial Accord... it's... it's fallen."

Wei Qingwei took a step forward. "Fallen? To Huan Hua?"

A frantic, jerky shake of the head. "No. Not Huan Hua. *Him.* Luo Binghe." The name was a whisper, a curse. "He didn't lay siege. He... he just walked in. The doors... they just... exploded."

Shen Jiu's fan, which had been slowly waving, froze dead in his hand. "And?"

"He stood there. In the dust. And he gave them a choice." The disciple's voice gained a hysterical edge. "Kneel to him as the 'Half-Blood Sovereign'... or die. Old Master Song of the Stone Turtle Sect... he stood. He said... he said we would never..."

The disciple's eyes glazed over, seeing it all again. "He didn't even move. There was just... a flash of darkness. And Master Feng... he wasn't there anymore. Just... ash. A pile of ash on

the floor."

A beat of absolute, suffocating silence, broken only by the disciple's ragged breathing.

Then, from the corner of the room, a strangled, incredulous voice muttered what everyone was thinking. It was Shang Qinghua, his face having lost all color as he stared at the messenger, his ledgers forgotten.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," he breathed, the vulgarity shocking in the formal hall.

"He just... he *dustified* him?"

He stood amidst the sea of kneeling sect leaders, the polished floor a dark mirror reflecting their bowed heads and trembling forms. The air was thick with the sweet-sour stench of their terror, a perfume that made Xin Mo purr in his grasp, its dark blade drinking deeply of the offered humiliation.

But the satisfaction was a phantom limb, a ghost of a feeling that could not touch the frozen, howling void where his heart should be. The power, the fear, the submission—it was all ash in his mouth, dust motes dancing in a sunbeam that could not warm him.

This is not enough, a desperate, broken part of him whispered. *None of this is enough.*

He closed his eyes, and for a single, agonizing moment, he was not a sovereign standing over a conquered hall, but a boy in a cold woodshed, clutching a threadbare blanket, listening to the world move on without him. He saw a pair of eyes, calm and intelligent, looking at him not with contempt or pity, but with a focus that had once made him feel *seen*. A memory, sharp as a shard of glass: a quiet voice explaining the properties of a Qi-Sensitive Moss-Hopper, a world of intricate, logical beauty unfolding just for him.

The memory was a brand, searing in its intensity. *You were my sanctuary,* the thought was a raw, open wound. *And you were the one who pushed me into the dark.*

Xin Mo fed on the fresh wave of anguish, its hum deepening into a possessive, resonant snarl. The kneeling figures before him blurred. They were not subjects. They were not pawns. They were kindling. They were the first, desperate logs thrown onto a pyre meant to be so vast, so blindingly bright, that its light would pierce every shadow, smoke out every hiding place, and illuminate the one face he needed to see.

He would burn this world, piece by piece, until the flames forced Shen Qingchun to look at him. Until he had no choice but to turn from whatever hole he was cowering in and finally, *finally*, meet the eyes of the monster he had created.

In the opulent main hall of Huan Hua Palace, the Old Palace Master stood before his senior disciples, his face a mask of grim vindication. "You see now the depth of their treachery!" he thundered, slamming his fist on an armrest. "Cang Qiong cries victim, but it was *their* Peak Lord, Shen Qingchun, who was revealed as a demonic plant! It was from *our* righteous custody that he was extracted! And now, this 'Half-Blood Sovereign' emerges, attacking not them, but our allies? This is no coincidence! This is a coordinated pincer attack! They are in alliance, and they mean to devour us all!" The logic, twisted and paranoid, was terrifyingly compelling to those who had been fed a diet of suspicion and lies for months.

In the Qiong Ding war room, the initial shock curdled into cold, hard strategy.

"He's consolidating power on our flank," Wei Qingwei growled, his hand instinctively going to the hilt of his sword.

"But the *timing*," Shen Jiu cut in, his voice like cracking ice. "He emerges now, from the shadows of Huan Hua's incompetence, to attack the neutrals? He draws every eye towards himself, away from the golden snake who let him slip his leash. This is not a declaration of

independence. This is the opening move in Huan Hua's final offensive. They have unleashed their rabid dog to soften us up."

Yue Qingyuan's face was grave. The logic was twisted, but in the fog of war, it was terrifyingly plausible. "Then we have no choice," he said, his voice heavy. "We must prepare to fight a war on two fronts. Against the demon they unleashed, and the sect that holds the chain." The order was unspoken but understood: Cang Qiong would now fight for its very survival against two seemingly allied, monstrous forces.

The report was laid before Tianlang-Jun by a trembling lesser demon. He listened, his expression one of profound, glacial boredom, as the details of the summit's subjugation were recounted. There was no smile. No flicker of triumph. When the demon finished, there was only a long, contemptuous silence.

"Fools," he finally said, the word a shard of ice dropped into the quiet. "Scrabbling in the dirt, thinking their petty squabbles over righteousness and power mean anything." He flicked his fingers, a dismissive gesture as if swatting a gnat. "Let the rabid pup chew on the lambs. It saves me the trouble of putting them down myself."

He rose, his movements fluid and utterly devoid of warmth, and walked to a window overlooking the stark, demonic landscape. "The only disappointment is their inefficiency," he mused, his tone that of a master craftsman critiquing a sloppy apprentice. "At this rate, that preening peacock in his golden cage will be dead before I can personally peel the skin from his bones and show him the rot he's built his legacy upon. He needs to suffer. Properly."

He turned, his eyes, dark and ancient, fixing on Zhuzhi-lang who stood waiting in the shadows. "Our gardener's delicate cultivation is taking too long. The season for subtlety is over. It is time to salt the earth." His voice was flat, devoid of malice, which made it all the more terrifying. It was the sound of absolute, casual annihilation. "I want him to know I am coming. Let him spend his final days staring at the mountain, waiting for the avalanche he knows is coming. You know what to do."

The news of the accelerated timeline was delivered not by Tianlang-Jun, but by the grim finality in Zhuzhi-lang's posture. The subtle pressure that had been a constant presence became a vice.

The message was clear: the theoretical was now a deadline.

For a long time after Zhuzhi-lang left, Shen Yuan sat perfectly still in the obsidian chamber. The scrolls and schematics before him, once a fascinating puzzle, now looked like a scaffold for an execution.

His mind fractured, retreating from the unbearable present. He was seventeen again, standing with his new martial siblings on a rain-slicked training ground for their first joint exercise. He saw a young Wei Qingwei, face alight with passion, proudly showing off his first successfully forged dagger, proclaiming he would one day create blades that would become Cang Qiong's legacy. He saw Liu Qingge, a bristling, untamed teenager, his focus already terrifyingly absolute, but his eyes holding a spark of competitive fire, not the dead ice of a slaughter-monument. He saw Shang Qinghua, tripping over his own robes, more interested in cataloging the types of moss on the cobblestones than the drill, dreaming of a quiet life managing supply closets.

And there was Qi-ge—Yue Qingyuan—already carrying the weight of a future sect leader on his broad shoulders, but his smile was still soft and genuine as he gently corrected a junior's stance, his eyes holding a quiet, desperate hope that this, finally, was the safe harbor he had promised them all.

And A-Jiu… his A-Jiu, standing slightly apart, trying to look aloof and unimpressed. But his eyes, sharp and wary, had flickered to Shen Yuan again and again, a silent question: *Are we safe here?* And Shen Yuan had met his gaze and given a tiny, imperceptible nod. *Yes. With me, you are safe.*

That fragile, hard-won trust, built in blood and fire, was now being used as kindling for the end of the world.

The weight of it all, the sheer, catastrophic absurdity, pressed down on him, crushing the air from his lungs. The careful, cunning walls he had built around his mind crumbled, and a single, broken word escaped him, not as a question, but as a plea to an uncaring universe.

"...why?"

A voice, cold and ancient, answered from the shadows by the door, making him flinch. He hadn't realized he was no longer alone.

"Why?" Tianlang-Jun repeated, stepping into the dim light. His regal composure was gone, eroded by something raw and jagged. "I do not know why, A-Yuan."

The use of the old, familiar name was a shock. For a dizzying moment, Shen Yuan wasn't in a demon's lair. He was back in a dusty bookshop, sunlight streaming through the window, illuminating motes of dust dancing in the air. Tianlang-Jun—just "Jun" then—was holding up a truly dreadful romance novel, his expression one of mock outrage.

"You can't just say the protagonist's change of heart is 'biologically implausible,' A-Yuan! It's called poetic license!"

"It's called bad writing! If you're going to have a demon lord reform, you need to establish the capacity for empathy earlier, not just have him trip and fall in love! The foundation is rotten!"

They had bickered for a full hour, the shopkeeper looking on in bewilderment at the well-dressed man and the passionate scholar arguing over pulp fiction. It had been… fun.

The memory was a sweet, sharp pain. That man was gone.

The man before him now was all sharp edges and frozen grief. "Why did she betray me?" he whispered, the Heavenly Demon's voice cracking. "We read those trashy novels together. We laughed. I thought… I thought what we had was real. I trusted her. And she led them to me.

She must have. Who else knew my heart? Who else could have told them how to trap me? Why would she do that?"

He was no longer looking at Shen Yuan as a tool, but as the only remaining relic of a life before the betrayal. The only one who remembered the man who loved silly love stories.

Shen Yuan looked at this broken king, and the logician in him, the part that could never fully be silenced, saw the fatal flaw in the story. He saw the grief that had blinded Tianlang-Jun to it for decades.

"Then why is she dead?" Shen Yuan asked, his voice quiet but clear, the question a scalpel. "If she was the hero who betrayed the Heavenly Demon, why isn't she a celebrated master of Huan Hua? Why is your son alive? A child of such a 'union' would be a stain on her victory. He would have been erased before his first breath."

He let the questions hang in the air, the unspoken truth taking shape in the silence between them. Tianlang-Jun spoke, his voice dropped, softening with a devastating and shared understanding.

"Does it matter?" he breathed out, "Sometimes I feel it's not because of a 'why' at all. Sometimes I wonder if it's just because some things... break. And there's no logic that can put them back together."

It was not an answer. It was a confession.

“Tian, listen to me,” Shen Yuan had started, with a voice light enough to not break the melancholy spread between the two, which immediately was shattered by a demon scout bursting into the chamber, bowing low.

Tianlang-Jun’s grief vanished, replaced by a terrifying, cold satisfaction. "As intended. The leak has served its purpose." He turned his gaze to Shen Yuan, all traces of the man from the bookshop gone. "The chaos catalyzes the seal's instability. The energy of their conflict will fuel the final stages. Your theoretical work is over, Shen Qingchun. The seal will be broken. Now. Prepare yourself."

The order was a death sentence. Not just for him, but for everyone on that mountain, and for the world beyond.

The moment the chamber door closed, Shen Yuan turned. The flat obedience was gone. His face was a pale, calm mask, but his eyes held a glacial fire.

"What," he asked, his voice dangerously quiet, "did you just do?"

Tianlang-Jun waved a dismissive hand. "I merely sent a small incentive. A whisper to each faction that their enemies seek to claim the seal's power for themselves. They are now racing to Bailu Mountain, like moths to a flame."

The calm on Shen Yuan's face did not break. It hardened, like ice over a bottomless lake.

"A flame you built," Shen Yuan said, his voice dropping to a venomous, conversational tone. "Tell me, Tian. When you break that seal and your revenge is complete, what will you have? You will sit on a throne of ashes, in a world permanently scarred by the rift you tore open. A fitting monument, I suppose, for a love you were too blind to understand."

Tianlang-Jun's smirk faltered.

"You spent decades festering in the dark, clinging to the story of the betrayed lover," Shen Yuan continued, each word a precisely aimed scalpel. "It was a comforting story, wasn't it? Simple. It let you paint her as the villain and yourself as the tragic hero. It was easier than asking the real question: if she betrayed you, why did she die? Why is the proof of your love —your *son*—alive? The math never added up, but you were too proud, too *pathetic*, to do the sums. You preferred the beautiful, tragic lie to the ugly, complicated truth."

He took a step closer, his gaze unwavering.

"So you will burn the world for a lie. You will murder thousands for a story you told yourself to make the pain feel noble. You aren't an avenging lord. You're a child who had his favorite toy taken away, and now you're throwing a tantrum so grand it will shatter the heavens." Shen Yuan's lips curled into a cruel, mocking smile. "What a magnificent, devastatingly petty little king you are."

The air in the chamber did not simply thicken—it curdled. A deep, gut-churning dissonance vibrated through the stone, a sound that was less a hum and more the death rattle of the mountain itself. The very light seemed to warp, shadows twisting unnaturally as the seal's ancient matrix was violently overloaded with raw, corrupting power.

Shen Yuan's head snapped up, his blood running cold. His mind, a library of spiritual mechanics and ecological systems, screamed in silent horror. This wasn't a controlled break. It was a spiritual cancer, metastasizing in real time. "He's not breaking it—he's poisoning it! The feedback will unmake everything it touches!"

From the shadows, Tianlang-Jun's voice was a sliver of absolute zero. "I instructed him to pour the demonic cesspool directly into its heart the moment the insects gathered at our door. Let their righteous fury be the spark that ignites the rot. A fitting end for their hypocrisy."

The monstrousness of the plan—to use Zhuzhi-lang's unwavering loyalty as the delivery system for a weapon of spiritual annihilation that would inevitably consume him—slammed into Shen Yuan. This was not vengeance. It was a spiteful, cosmic suicide bomb.

"You'd really do it, wouldn't you?" Shen Yuan's voice was a low, horrified whisper that cracked with the strain. He turned, his eyes wide, staring at the demon lord as if seeing a new, more terrifying form of monster. "You'd burn your own nephew alive. You'd use the boy who adores you as a fuse for your pyre, just to prove a point to a ghost."

He didn't wait for the answer he saw gleaming in Tianlang-Jun's cold, dead eyes. Shen Yuan turned and ran, not just with desperation, but with a furious, terrified purpose, charging toward the epicenter of the screaming chaos.

To any observer on the chaotic battlefield, the scene at the ritual platform was one of pure, escalating doom.

Zhuzhi-lang, bathed in a torrent of violent demonic energy, stood as the obvious source of the mountain's terrifying tremors. The air screamed around him, the seal's matrix flaring with unstable, sickly light. It was clear to everyone—Cang Qiong, Huan Hua, Luo Binghe—that the demon was moments from breaking the seal and unleashing hell.

And there was Shen Yuan, rushing *toward* the epicenter.

From any vantage point but Tianlang-Jun's, it looked like a final, damning act of allegiance. The Ling You Peak Lord, bathed in the same hellish light as the demon, his hands moving in frantic, intricate patterns *within* the volatile energy field. He wasn't fighting Zhuzhi-lang. He wasn't trying to escape. He was standing beside him, actively engaging with the apocalyptic ritual.

It was the final, undeniable proof the Old Palace Master needed. It was the ultimate betrayal Luo Binghe feared. It was the heartbreaking sight that confirmed Cang Qiong's worst nightmares—their Shen Qingchun, lost to the darkness, helping to orchestrate the end of the world.

But Tianlang-Jun, whose senses were honed by centuries and a deep, intimate connection to the seal's nature, felt the truth like a physical blow.

The energy was shifting.

It was… beautiful.

The thought was a profanity, an insult to the decades of hatred that had festered in his soul. Yet, he could not deny it. As he watched Shen Yuan work, a part of him that had been buried under Bailu Mountain—the scholar, the man who had once found joy in deconstructing the

elegant logic of a well-told story, even a trashy one—stirred in reluctant, awe-struck admiration.

This was not the crude hacking of a brute. This was the work of a sublime intellect operating at the very peak of its ability under impossible pressure. Shen Yuan was not just fighting the seal; he was *understanding* it on a level that surpassed its original architects. He was finding a third path where none should exist, not by overpowering the problem, but by outthinking it. He was turning Tianlang-Jun's grand, tragic revenge into a complex equation and solving it.

And that was the true betrayal.

This was worse than defiance. Defiance he could crush. This was *correction*. Shen Yuan was proving, with every precise, graceful movement, that Tianlang-Jun's vengeance was not only monstrous, but it was also… *unnecessary*. It was inefficient. It was the clumsy, emotional response of a lesser mind. His glorious apocalypse was being reduced to a technical flaw, and Shen Yuan was the technician calmly implementing the patch.

The awe he felt was a poison in his veins. The scholar in him marveled at the genius on display. The avenger in him screamed, watching his life's purpose being dismantled into something as mundane as a solution. He stood paralyzed, a king witnessing his throne being melted down for scrap, captivated by the skill of the smith who wielded the torch.

A silent scream of pure, thwarted rage tore through Tianlang-Jun. His hand, crackling with enough power to level a city, rose to strike. To shatter Shen Yuan's focus and reclaim his destined apocalypse.

And then he froze.

His centuries-honed instincts screamed a warning more primal than his hunger for revenge. To interfere now was not to guide the explosion, but to become part of the fuel. A terrible, chilling certainty locked his muscles—he was a spectator at his own execution.

It was in this frozen, furious impotence that the end began.

The world stretched into a single, horrifying moment. Shen Yuan saw it all—the brilliant green lance of A-Jiu's spiritual energy, the roaring black tide of Luo Binghe's demonic power. They were not just aimed at his ritual. They were aimed at each other, a collision that would shatter more than just the mountain.

There was no time.

"STAY BACK!"

His voice was a raw, final crack in the air. Then he moved.

He did not turn toward one or away from the other. In one fluid, terrible motion, he placed himself squarely between them, his body a desperate, final shield.

Shen Jiu watched, his own strike faltering, as his brother interposed himself against the devouring black energy meant for him. He saw the demonic power engulf Yuan-ge, saw his body seize—a sacrifice made to protect him from the beast's killing blow.

Luo Binghe watched, his lunge freezing, as his Shibo turned to face the viper's green lance, taking the full, piercing force of the attack meant for his own heart. He saw the righteous energy tear through him—a final, devastating act of protection.

In that shared, fractured second, both men saw the same truth from opposite sides of the same tragedy: Shen Yuan had died saving *them* from the other.

The sound was a sickening, wet crackle—the sound of a soul torn apart by two opposing devotions.

He fell.

And their world fell with him.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you thought of the plot or other things....

Also other things. Idk if it was noticeable, or it got kinda dissolved in the writing, but SY, is calm until it is one of his in the line of fire. Anyone he likes really. The closer, the more panicked, the more desperate he grows. Otherwise that guy is indifferent af to tragedies.
Yes it's called being a drama queen.

End Notes

Shen Yuan : (smiles sweetly, the smile doesn't really reach his eyes.)

Fu Xin : Oh god. (Rings discrete sect wide alarm for an illegal disciple peer group.)

Ming Fan: I will have to be the one to tell Shizun, won't I?

Ning YingYing: Well, you are the Head Disciple.

Ming Fan: I didn't sign up for this. (Resigned, goes to inform Shen Jiu)

Liu Mingyan: (To Ning YingYing) Is this why you rejected the head disciple position?

Ning YingYing: (Fixing her cute buns) What Head Disciple position? I am just a cute little girl who can't fight. (Flashes a cute smile.)

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